

Halo: The Secret Spartan

by Auralee

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Summary: The Spartans find out there's another Spartan on Earth, one who never officially existed. When forced to work with her, they find Blade to be very different from what they expected. Rated M for content in later chapters. If under 18 DO NOT READ!

1. Prologue

Halo: The Secret Spartan

Summary

The Spartans have returned to Earth only to discover a new difficulty awaiting them: an ONI special operative known as BLADE. The first in the SPARTAN project, she's become suspicious and bitter, preferring to survive on her own. When she and the Spartans are forced to work together, a complication arises that may be the end of Blade, something that neither she nor the other Spartans expected.

Cast (new faces): The Major Players

****General Mark West:**** CO of Camp Hayes, and a close friend to Laura/Blade. He knows that beneath her hot-tempered mask lies a sharp mind and lonely heart. Appalled by what she's had to endure, he wishes he could do more than listen. Yet every time Laura gets the better of ONI, he secretly laughs at their frustration.

****Dr. Frances Gedeon:**** Laura's mother and a prominent physician/microbiologist. While she is disgusted by what ONI is allowing to happen to her daughter, she refuses to believe that an officer could be involved. She's taught Laura most of what she knows about the medical field, and is always willing to let her daughter lend a hand at the base hospital.

****Nicole Mitchell (Nick):**** Laura's best, and truest, friend. Nicole knows just about everything that goes on in her friend's life, and

can read her like a book at times. While unwilling to betray her only real friend, Nick knows that sometimes it takes a betrayal to prevent an even greater betrayal.

****Lorienna:**** An AI unit created by Laura without ONI's knowledge or assistance. Possessing many of her creator's personality traits, Lorienna can be a bit of a smartass, but loyal. Her code-cracking skills allow her and Laura to keep an eye on what goes on that ONI doesn't want Laura to know.

****Laura Morisson (SPARTAN-000):**** Codenamed BLADE for her proficiency with martial arts and combat knives, Laura was the test case for the SPARTAN-II project. Once the project began to be successful, ONI tried to bury her at Camp Hayes, except for the occasional black op. Laura and ONI have been at loggerheads ever since she found out the truth about herself and the SPARTAN project, and all their attempts to control her have failed—so far. Her drive to succeed comes from family loyalty and a sense of right and wrong that ONI has failed to break.

****Nathan Mitchell:**** Nicole's older brother. Nathan and his daughter Taylor have a soft spot for Laura, and have 'adopted' her as a member of the family. Nathan secretly hopes to catch Laura's eye, but Laura feels nothing but a brotherly affection for him.

****Skeeter:**** Nicole's Pembroke Welsh corgi. Skeeter is a very active fellow, but more perceptive than most would expect. While he can be annoying at times, his presence is usually enough to make both Laura and Nicole feel cheery. He has a tendency to 'laugh' at people.

**Prologue-2515**

**North America**

The little girl looked at her mother and father. She didn't understand what was going on, but knew the strange men in funny clothes were taking her somewhere. One of the strange men called to her, saying it was time to go.

"Come on, Mommy and Daddy! We're going away!"

"No, sweetheart. You're going alone. Daddy and I can't come with you."

The four-year-old realized then that she was going away for good. When the strange men came to put her in the funny-looking car, she clung to her mother's leg and refused to let go. The men couldn't pull her off: this particular four-year-old was exceptionally strong. They looked at her parents for assistance. Her mother knelt down to eye-level with the child.

"Laura, I know this is hard, but it's for the best. I promise you'll be well taken care of, and Daddy or I will come visit you at times."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Laura didn't really understand, but she knew her mommy had made a promise. Mommy never lied to her, and that was enough. She followed the men into the car and drove away from her home. Her mother and father waved her goodbye.

"Do you think we'll ever see her again?"

"I promised her we'd visit, Pete. And I have no intention of breaking that promise. We've given the military our baby, so the least they could do is allow us to see her once in a while."

"I hope you're right. Something doesn't feel right, though. I can't put my finger on it, but there's something wrong."

"We'll deal with that when the time comes. Meanwhile, the UNSC will take care of Laura."

****Present day-September 4, 2552****

****Sydney, Australia ****

Lieutenant Wagner did all he could to keep from flinching as Ackerson approached.

"Everyone on Reach is dead. Dead, dead, dead." He jabbed the lieutenant's chest each time for emphasis. Before he could say anything more, however, a young ensign ran into the room.

"Sirs, we just received word from Camp Hayes: a Pelican just took off without clearance." Wagner wasn't the only one who noticed Ackerson stiffen slightly.

"Have you hailed the ship?" Admiral Hood asked.

"Yes, sir, but we've received no response other than a code 392." Ackerson really stiffened at that.

"Open a channel with that Pelican," Hood barked.

Once the frequency was open, he addressed the unknown pilot: "This is Fleet Admiral Hood of the UNSC Security Council. Who are you and what are you doing with that ship?"

The screen wavered, and a picture came up: a young-looking woman with dark brown hair and intense dark eyes. There was something familiar about her face, especially the stern, piercing look. Wagner was the only one who noticed Ackerson pale.

"Admiral Hood, a pleasure. My father always spoke quite highly of you."

"Who are you?" Hood barked. The woman raised an eyebrow, completely unperturbed by the Admiral's anger.

"I'm what ONI Section Three considers a very dangerous mistake, a flaw if you will. They tried to bury me at Camp Hayes, except for the occasional black op. This time, though, I'm going on my own." Her face hardened. "You wanted a scouting mission to Reach, now you've got it."

"And how did you know we were even discussing the possibility of a scouting mission?" Hood asked in incredulous amazement.

"Even though I usually don't leave Camp Hayes, I have eyes and ears everywhere; some of them are as sharp as my combat knives."

"I order you to come back here at once!" Ackerson barked, his voice noticeably hostile.

"Order all you like, Ackerson, I'm not coming back until I know what happened to Reach, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it. Don't worry, though, I won't ever lead the Covenant back to Earth." Her dark eyes narrowed dangerously. "If I didn't know better, Ackerson, I'd say you didn't care about Reach falling; you must have more to hide than your standard black ops. I don't know what you're hiding, and at this point I don't really give a damn. I'm going to Reach, and I'm going to get some answers."

"You still haven't answered my question--who are you?" Hood asked for a third time.

"Very well, Admiral, I'll tell you just to piss Ackerson off." She smirked. "I'm a Spartan, in a sense. Most people only call me by my codename BLADE, but in actuality I am a Morisson."

Just about every jaw dropped in the room. "Morisson?" Hood asked in disbelief, as he finally realized why her face looked so familiar.

"Morisson. As in Commander Phil Morisson, Lieutenant Matt Morisson, and Colonel Pete Morisson; that's why I'm going to Reach, I have to know what happened. Of course, you'll never find any records on me past the age of four, unless you ask Ackerson. Ah, there's my ride." The woman flipped a few switches. "See you in a couple days."

The com channel blinked off, and Wagner noticed every eye in the room turn to Ackerson. This is going to make for an interesting report to Section Three, he thought, carefully keeping his face impassive.

"Colonel, I think you have some explaining to do," Hood murmured, his voice low and threatening.

A few days later, at exactly 1800 hours, the UNSC Security Council (except for Colonel Ackerson) received a mission report that none of them expected to see:

The Covenant did not glass all of Reach. A decently-sized patch of the planet, though small in comparison with the whole, was left untouched. Closer examination revealed this area was the area surrounding a former ONI base of operations, codenamed CASTLE. It appeared that the Covenant were interrupted in the middle of an attempt to literally 'dig out' the installation. It was also apparent that, before their interruption, they were planning to hang around for a while: wrecked ships from the battle were piled in one area above Reach and construction of a platform had been started using pieces of the dead hulls.

Since the Covenant were no longer in the area, and since there had to be a greater reason for their interest besides being a human

installation, I landed nearby and took a look around. Underneath the CASTLE complex was something none of us would have expected to find, but apparently the Covenant were looking for. There was a vast room beneath the surface, with tunnels branching off in every direction, and tiled symbols and glyphs everywhere. In spite of the evidence of there being a fairly recent battle in that area, there was enough there that was still intact. A video feed will follow shortly. Now I know what Ackerson was trying to hide: he had to have known about this, and known the Covenant would come looking. I recommend a full investigation into his activities; if he knew the Covenant would be stopping by he should have warned us._

2. Chapter 1: Homecoming

Disclaimer: I do not own the Master Chief or any of the characters from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books. Feel free to make any comments you'd like, and enjoy!

Chapter One: Homecoming

"_What've we got, Lориenna?"_

"_Apparently, there's a team of Spartans that survived Reach, and Ackerson's planning a warm welcome home for them."_

"_Warm welcome? From Ackerson? You must be joking!"_

"_As warm as he ever gets, anyways. Most of the officers are going to be there."_

"_Good. More people for Ackerson to feel embarrassed in front of. Wait here."_

"_And where exactly am I going to go, outside of ONI's own networks?"_

"_Stay out of there for now. I'll be back in a few hours."_

****September 15, 2552 0945 hours****

****Camp Hayes UNSC Reserve Base****

****North America****

SPARTAN-000, codenamed BLADE, perched in a tree overlooking the parade grounds, with a 'borrowed' sniper rifle in her hands; she had a 'message' she wanted to send to a certain colonel. She adjusted the sniper rifle to allow better visibility, even though what she saw disgusted her as she watched the brass welcome some surviving members of the Reach massacre. _So, the surviving SPARTANS receive a heroes' welcome, while I'm forgotten as usual! Haven't I done as much as them, if not a little more? Yet I'm thrown aside like a useless weapon!_ She knew, however, there was more than just her being useless. According to military files, SPARTAN-000 did not officially exist; the only evidence of her life was in classified Office of Naval Intelligence files, which most people never got to see. Even though she knew it was unfair, Blade knew there was nothing that could be done about it, short of treason and data terrorism.

The welcoming reception was starting to wind down. Watching through the scope, she noticed Colonel James Ackerson, one of ONI's scumbag COs, scowling when he thought no one was looking. _Hello, Ackerson, you sadistic bastard. Have I got a surprise for you when you turn this way._ Blade saw General Mark West (the only general she really respected) look around and turn to Ackerson. She smiled, guessing what they were talking about, but directed a SpecOps mike towards their location anyways, keeping Ackerson locked in her scope. A tiny speaker let her eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Colonel Ackerson, are you sure this area is secure?"

"Positive, General West. I have my best men in position and on surveillance. Nothing can get in or out without our knowing it."

"Well then, Colonel, I must say I'm rather disappointed in your security perimeter."

"What do you mean, sir? I have men posted every two meters around the parade grounds. There's no way anyone could get past without getting caught."

"Oh, really? Then would you kindly tell me what you see near the trees over there?"

"I see one of my men in the tree on guard, waitâ€¦|No one is supposed to be in a tree!"

_"Of course not, Colonel, since that _isn't _one of your men. Unless I'm much mistaken, Laura broke through your best men's perimeter and is watching us right now."_

"BLADE? Here? Impossible!"

While Ackerson was still facing her, and before he had the chance to turn away, Blade squeezed the trigger; the report of the sniper rifle rang out clear, and Ackerson went down. The paint pellet she'd nailed him with wouldn't kill him, unfortunately, but it had hit him with enough velocity to ensure that he'd be out cold for about three hours. _Right between the eyes, you asshole,_ she smiled maliciously as she dropped the rifle and swung through the trees like a monkey. By the time anyone showed up to investigate, all they found was a sniper rifle, the SpecOps mike, and a canister of paint pellets.

Meanwhile, the Spartans were scattering, trying to evade any further sniper rounds as they'd been trained, and hoping to spot the sniper; Linda swore she saw a shadow moving in the trees, knowing exactly where to spot a potential sniper, and fired three rounds from her assault rifle (two of them barely missing Blade as she slipped away). Marines were scrambling for cover, and general chaos ran rampant. The only one unperturbed was General West, who was busy shaking his head at the blotch of red between Ackerson's eyes, chuckling to himself.

"Oh, Laura, what are we going to do with you this time? Although I must say,

your accuracy is faultless." He noticed one of the Spartans heading toward him.

"Sir, perhaps you'd better take cover."

"No need, son. Whoever it was got what they came for," he said, motioning to the prone figure of Colonel Ackerson, complete with red paint blotch between his eyes. "Non-lethal rounds. The shooter wasn't aiming to kill outright, just to send a message, and did it quite effectively. He'll be unconscious for a while, but that's about all." He was still smiling as he walked off to meet the search teams, a behavior which puzzled the Spartan. _Although, there is a lot of hard feelings between ONI and the regular brass_, he thought. _Maybe that's why he was so amused._ The Spartan's team frequency kicked in, and he heard SPARTAN-117's voice: the Master Chief was taking charge of the situation.

"Okay, Linda managed to get a bead on the sniper's position. Let's see if we can't catch the sniper, whoever he is. Move out."

Blade, otherwise known as Laura Morisson, swung away through the trees, dropping back to earth only when she was reasonably sure she was safe. _OK, everyone back there is scared shitless, and Ackerson's out cold, which means I should be able to get back to base fairly easily. Job well done._ As far as casualties went, she'd caught one bullet in her shoulder, which she stopped and bandaged as best she could; she could get it looked at once she got back to base. She was still moving and congratulating herself when she sensed rather than saw something moving nearby, trying to flank her. _Oh shit,_ she realized with a cold chill. _I forgot about them! And now I got cocky and let them catch up to me!_ Mentally reviewing her knowledge of the local land and trying to come up with a plan, Laura sprinted off to the eastern edge of the woods. There were a number of tall oaks there; if she could outdistance the pursuit and get to them, she might have a chance. She was a few kilometers away when a giant in green armor blocked her path, assault rifle leveled; turning aside, she spotted two others on either side, and the one behind her moved up—she was boxed in. Thankful that she had masked her face, Laura waited to see how things would turn out.

Having caught up with the shooter, the four Spartans boxed him in to prevent him from escaping, keeping him in their gunsights. Activating his suit's external speakers, the Master Chief spoke, his voice calm and a little creepy.

"There's nowhere left for you to run. You may as well surrender."

The stranger turned and looked at him; piercing dark eyes stared at him without fear. In fact, there was nothing in the sniper's eyes but cold, calculating emotion. Moving his hand, the sniper's fingers flicked quickly, subtle hand signals used by the UNSC military. _Check your six,_ his fingers flashed; the hand signals caught the Chief off guard, making him think for a moment that he'd cornered a Marine who'd been set as a lookout in the trees. As the Chief turned, the sniper moved faster than any of them had anticipated: he ran forward and leaped straight up and over the Master Chief in his armor, no easy task considering the Spartan in his armor stood nearly two meters tall. He'd almost jumped over the Spartan when the Chief grabbed his ankle, catching the sniper off-guard and nearly breaking

bone. The sniper twisted in midair with the motion of the hand attached to his ankle, getting enough of an angle to break free. He hit the ground hard, and let out a grunt (oddly high-pitched for a man) as he landed, but had managed to get out of the box set up by the four-Spartan team. Bouncing neatly and quickly to his feet, he sprinted quickly into the shadows of the trees; by the time they were able to catch up, there was no one there.

Laura perched in the shadowy branches of an oak, ignoring the pain in her shoulder and ankle, listening as the Spartans caught up to her. Making as little movement as possible, she listened quietly, waiting for them to leave so she could get out of there. As she waited, she noticed a group of Marines approaching.

"General West said you'd gone this way. Did you find the sniper?" the leader, a Lieutenant, asked.

"We tracked him here, sir," one of the Spartans replied. From the voice, it was the one who'd told her to surrender.

"Where did he go?" one of the other Marines asked.

"We're still searching, but I think he's long gone from here, otherwise we would have found him."

"Alright, Marines, you heard the man. Let's move out!" The Marines formed up and followed their Lieutenant out of the oak grove. The Spartans, on the other hand, stayed there for several more minutes; Laura was quite cramped by the time they moved out. Staying alert for a few more seconds in the tree, she dropped soundlessly, wincing as she landed on her sore ankle, and slipped back to the base. _Well, I think I've learned something today: don't gloat until you're safe home, or your ass is grass._ Laura headed to her bunk at the nearby military base where she'd lived for almost 37 years. She had a feeling that General West would stop in later to see if she really had been at the parade grounds earlier.

The Spartans stood and watched as the sniper dropped from the trees and slipped into the shadows. After SPARTAN-043, Will, had reported that Colonel Ackerson had been shot with non-lethal rounds, the Master Chief had concluded that the sniper was no immediate threat, a conclusion reinforced by the hand signals given. Besides, he'd seen a small amount of blood on the sniper's blacksuit during the escape earlier, indicating he'd been hit by a bullet from Linda's battle rifle; the wound would make it fairly easy to find him, identify him, and deal with him when it was least expected. As they watched him slip away into the shadows, they tried to plan their next move.

"Personally, I don't think it's a good idea to just let him go," SPARTAN-104, Fred, commented.

"He could have easily killed that colonel, but purposely didn't. And remember General West's conclusions? He was trying to send a message," Will replied.

"Whatever the case, it's too late to do anything about it now," the Master Chief replied. "Just keep alert and on your toes: we don't know what's going to happen next." The other Spartans nodded assent and they headed back to the base for debriefing.

****Blade's Bunkhouse 1000 hours****

****Camp Hayes****

Sure enough, General West dropped in for a surprise visit. Laura welcomed him with a smile and some homemade bread.

"I had a feeling you'd be dropping in, General. How was the welcoming ceremony?"

"It went off fairly well. I figured you'd be watching. How did you know about it anyway?"

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies. Suffice it to say, I don't miss much around here. How did Ackerson react to the Spartans?"

"He seemed quite polite, until he noticed you were nearby and you shot him. Why do you ask?"

"I saw the whole thing, and watched his face in particular. He had a brief look of disgust on his face, but masked it well. Knowing how much he hates the SPARTAN program, I'm surprised he was even there at all."

"How do you know he hates the program?" West was puzzled.

Easy. ONI needs to encrypt their files better." Laura winked at a chagrined West. "I saw a number of disparaging references to the Spartans. Plus, it's fairly easy for me to read people, and Ackerson shows himself to be nothing more than a slimy, sadistic, disgusting, treacherous bastard who cheated and blackmailed his way to the top. And you wonder why I don't trust him?" Laura paused and shook a few escaped strands of her dark hair out of her eyes.

"It doesn't help he keeps trying to eliminate me, either. I'm constantly having to watch my back. The number of Marines I've been forced to incapacitate is disgusting, but he won't stop. He's determined to eliminate me."

"I can't believe that Colonel Ackerson would even stoop to such things, even for ONI."

"Believe it." Laura stood up and walked to the window. It showed a beautiful view of distant mountains and sky, but she wasn't cheered by the view. West saw she had something on her mind and waited. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet and sad.

"I'm tired of this war, General. I'm tired of having to make sure everything is safe before turning around a corner, worrying about my family, fighting my fellow soldiers, worrying about the Covenant. I'm tired of spending my entire life on a military installation. Most of all, I'm tired of not existing, of being nothing more than a 'mistake' listed in ONI's classified files. It's wearing me down, eating me away, and I can't stop it."

"There's nothing I can do, Laura. Even if I could do something, I'd have to justify my decision. My hands are tied either way."

"I know, but you at least listen. That's more than anyone else here does."

After West left, he toyed with the idea in his mind. _Maybe there is a way to help her. Perhaps Cortanaâ€¦_ He smiled at the thought. _There's one person ONI _can't _control._

Laura stood at her window, mentally turning over the events of the day, when a soft, disembodied voice spoke in her ear.

"I've been listening to the chatter on base. You've put a few people in an uproar again: what did you do this time?"

"Paintball sniping," Laura smiled. "Unfortunately, I almost got caught."

"The Spartans?"

"Who else? Thank goodness I was near some oaks when they caught up, otherwise I'd never have gotten away." She didn't need to say more, since both she and Lorienna knew what she meant. A throbbing in her shoulder broke her chain of thought; she'd forgotten about the bullet wound.

"You should get that looked at," the AI voiced as Laura dug the bullet out.

"And risk some awkward questions? No, better wait until the heat dies down first." As she tended the wound, Laura's mind wandered back to her encounter with the four Spartans. _They really are as good as I've heard,_ she thought grudgingly. _Too bad they're ONI's toys. One thing's for sure, they are NOT getting near me ever again!_

****ONI Building 1030 hours****

****Camp Hayes ****

SPARTAN-117, John (better known as the Master Chief), exited the debriefing area with his three remaining comrades: SPARTANS 104, 058, and 043(Fred, Linda, and Will). He was uneasy about the way ONI had handled the debriefing, especially the amount of scorn coming from Colonel Ackerson. While he was pondering this, he and his team were passed in the corridor by a fit, healthy young woman. Her dark hair was pulled back into a tight braid, she was almost as tall as the Master Chief, and she wore a tight-fitting black workout suit; strapped to a belt at her waist were a pair of combat knives. Her dark eyes were sparkling with intense anger, and her entire body was tensed, in spite of her fluid motions. She moved straight past them without even a word and headed for a nearby locker room. One of the guards tried to stop her, but she shot him such a look that he paled and shut his mouth. The Master Chief looked at his teammates.

"Wonder who that was? She definitely looks tough."

Fred added: "Did you see those knives? Bet she's an expert in hand-to-hand combat. I'd love to try her."

"Good luck with that, Spartan. It'd probably be close."

The Spartans turned to see General West standing behind them. They saluted hastily. West smiled to himself. _Here's how we bring Laura into the open._

"So, now you've seen one of ONI's best-kept secrets. Blade is one of the best soldiers in the military, so much so that the bureaucrats feel she's 'too valuable to lose'. She comes in every morning for a workout, and spends the rest of her time trying to keep herself occupied. She's a bit of a loose-cannon, but once you earn her trust you've got a real ally; the hard part is convincing her to trust you."

"Sir, if she's such a loose-cannon, why was she allowed in the military?" Will's tone was skeptical.

"Classified, son. Only top officials _and AI's_ can hear that." The General winked and strode off. Catching up with him, the Master Chief asked, "What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean, Chief, that unless you know a master hacker somewhere, you'll never find anything on Blade. So you may as well not ask me anymore questions, son." With that, the general walked off.

Fred, Will, and Linda were waiting for him at the end of the corridor. He looked at them all.

"I think we need to have a word with Cortana. If she can't find out about Blade, no one can."

"First let's see what she's up to, if she's really as good as the general said." Fred wanted to see this mysterious soldier in action for himself, as did the others. Without another word, they moved off to the locker room.

3. Chapter 2: Enigmas, Enigmas

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the characters from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Two: Enigmas, Enigmas

****September 15, 2552 1032 hours****

****Camp Hayes UNSC Reserve Base Training Facility****

****North America****

Laura was finishing up the first portion of her basic workout when she noticed four people watching her practice. She subtly looked them over and studied them without betraying her sudden interest: they were tall, solidly built, grim, and pale beyond belief. She knew then who and what they were but gave no sign: surprise was often the key to success, and she knew how to turn it to her advantage, having had almost thirty years to learn. They were all good-looking in their own grim way, but one in particular caught her eye: a handsome man, brown hair, with intense dark eyes and giving off an aura of leadership. Laura quickly focused her attention on stowing away her exercise gear before they could notice her studying them; she figured it would be a good idea to get out of there before she said some harsh words.

"You seem to be pretty good at close combat. Feel up to a little sparring?" one of the newcomers asked. Laura looked him over: he wasn't overly noticeable, and had silver-streaked black hair. Recalling the ONI files she'd hacked earlier, Laura remembered he was the close combat specialist of the group. Straightening her black workout suit, which had short sleeves to cover a bullet wound she'd received at their hands a short while ago, she directed a piercing stare at the stranger.

"I think I can handle it. Are you sure you can, though?" she challenged. As the man entered the arena, she sheathed her knives and tossed them to the edge.

At first, they circled each other, waiting for one of them to make the first move. Laura decided it would be her; she feinted left, then attacked from the right only to be blocked. She spun behind him slightly and kicked out as a counter to the block, caught her opponent in the butt, saw him sprawl on the floor, and waited for him to get back up.

"You really want this to continue? I can do this for hours if you want." The stranger came after her, as she guessed he would; she dodged his attack and spun, trying to land him on the ground. He caught her arm as she threw a punch, and she countered by sliding her leg behind his and bringing it forward just enough to make him lose his balance. She pulled free and flipped over his head, kicking him in the butt again as she landed. He lurched forward, and Laura tried to knock the legs out from under him, but he caught her leg and twisted. She moved with the force, spinning and landing on her hands, then flipping herself upright. Blocking a kick, she swung her leg around and caught him in the stomach. He doubled over, and Laura moved in, only to receive a blow to her gut. Yielding to the stroke, she tucked and rolled back, moving through the pain as she resumed the attack. Leaping to her feet, she was in time to block a pair of punches, which eventually resulted in a minor stalemate as both tried to force the other back.

"You're never going to win this," the stranger whispered through gritted teeth.

"Such arrogance is hardly fitting. Reeds bend while oaks fall," she replied calmly. She suddenly bent backwards, sending him tumbling off balance while she slipped free.

They went after each other fiercely after that, almost forgetting it was just an exercise. Both were experts in hand-to-hand combat, but Laura had a few tricks up her sleeve. Having become enamored of martial arts, she had studied as many as she could, which gave her an advantage she called to mind now: since most soldiers were only trained in basic hand-to-hand combat techniques, they never bothered to refine them or learn any others. Sliding into an unusual—but effective—combination of judo and jujitsu combat, she began to use her opponent's attacks against him while delivering nasty blows of her own, eventually slipping behind her opponent. While he was disoriented by her new form of attack, she knocked his legs out from under him, pulled him into a kneeling position, and put her weight on his legs while holding his arms together with one hand; her other hand was positioned on his carotid artery.

"I've got you by the throat, literally. One finger is all I needâ€"a little even pressure here and you're dead." Her voice was soft and dripped with venom as she emphasized her point by pressing lightly on the artery. As she removed her fingertip from the man's neck, she leaned down and whispered in his ear, "I know who you are, so don't try anything funny."

Applause sounded from a corner of the room, coming from a man in a colonel's uniform, whose shoulder patch marked him as belonging to ONI.

"Well done, Blade. Now finish him," the colonel said.

Laura immediately dropped her hands, releasing the man. She turned to the colonel, walked past him as if he weren't there, and gathered up her equipment. As she did so, her voice rang out clear: "Finish him yourself."

"Don't tell me what to do, Blade! I am your superior officer!" Laura continued walking out the door, but her voice still carried.

"You're FUBAR, Ackerson, and nothing else."

The Spartans looked at Fred, worried in spite of themselves. Will was the first to break the silence.

"Fred, are you alright?"

"I should have won. There's no way I could have lost!"

"I don't know what kind of stunt she pulled, but the results were certainly impressive. She's definitely not a normal Marine," John said with just a hint of bitterness; he was bothered by the fact of someone who seemed nothing more than a mere human taking out a Spartan, even though this human had a few qualities that could easily make her one of them.

"There's something else," Fred muttered, making sure no one except the Spartans heard him. "She knows who we are, and she told me she knew. She also warned me not to try anything funny."

"But how could she know?" Linda asked, her green eyes holding a slightly worried look, or as worried as Spartans ever got. "We aren't in our proper uniforms, and only ONI knows we're on base at the moment. Unless she's one of them?"

"The way she treated that ONI colonel, I'd be inclined to doubt it. It was almost as though she was purposely trying to provoke him." Will mused.

The group fell silent, trying to consider the possibilities. _Something's not adding up._ John thought. _But who can we ask?_

****Adams Medical Facility 1145 hours****

****Camp Hayes****

The Spartans and Sergeant Avery Johnson had been ordered to report to the medical wing for a physical; ONI was worried by the Master

Chief's and Sergeant Johnson's description of the Flood. Upon entering the medical office, they spotted an elderly woman in a white lab coat sitting in an overstuffed chair, idly flipping pages in a small book. The minute she noticed them, she put the book aside and stood up to greet them.

"Good afternoon. I hope you've had a fairly pleasant day so far. I'm Dr. Frances Gedeon." She held out her hand to Johnson and each of the Spartans in turn, and appeared unsurprised with their strength.

"Reporting as ordered for physical examination, ma'am," the Master Chief said.

"I'm aware of that, sir," the doctor replied dryly, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Unfortunately, not all of the data I need to begin the physical has arrived yet. Our wires get crossed over here occasionally. If you'll just wait here, I'll see to your physicals as soon as possible."

A nurse stuck her head through the door. "Dr. Gedeon, they need you in the lab right away. Apparently they're having problems with one of the tests you ordered." Dr. Gedeon shook her head resignedly and left, leaving her book behind.

John picked the book up and examined it curiously: it was too squared off and too thin to be a standard medical manual, and too thick to be any other book. He lifted the cover and looked at the pages.

"Anyone else care to look at what the good doctor left behind?" he asked. The other Spartans clustered around him and looked at the book, while Johnson lounged against a wall and flirted with the on-duty nurse.

It wasn't a regular book at all: it was a photo album, filled with pictures of what appeared to be Dr. Gedeon and her family, complete with tags marking dates, times, places, and an occasional humorous comment. The very first one was of a much younger doctor and a man in a Naval uniform, with an Ensign's rank insignia. The next few were pictures of what was obviously a wedding between the two. Following were various pictures of children growing up and doing normal kid things: seeing a young boy playing sports, another young boy sitting and laughing at some other child stuck in a large chest-freezer (where only the legs were visible), and a young girl hanging out of a tree brought hints of smiles to the Spartans' mouths as they spotted the humor in those seemingly innocent situations.

Towards the end of the album, there began to be less pictures of children and more pictures of adults: a young man graduating from the Naval Academy, a teenage boy showing off a class project, and a young girl carving a wooden bowl. They noticed that Dr. Gedeon had aged fairly well, but was still aging nonetheless: her dark brown hair began to show streaks of gray and silver, but her face was still smooth and young. Towards the last few pages of the album, one picture leaped out at them quite clearly; there was something about it that made it seem more real than any of the others they'd seen. The subject was a young woman lounging against a tree trunk, wearing civilian clothes colored in varying shades of blue. She had long dark hair and intense dark eyes, and seemed intelligent as well as good looking. What caught the Spartans' eyes most was the expression on

her face: there was a cool, confident look to it, as though she was saying _do your worst, I can handle it no matter what it is._ There was something familiar about her face, as if they'd seen it somewhere before. She bore a strong resemblance to Dr. Gedeon, and another few page turns revealed why.

The last snapshot in the album was plainly a family portrait. Sitting in the foreground was Dr. Gedeon and her husband, now sporting a Colonel's rank insignia on his collar and several medals and campaign ribbons on his uniform; the amount of decorations on his uniform could only be described as astounding for a non-Spartan. Next to them were two children, both about four years old, and a younger woman who could only be their mother. Standing in the background were two young men and the woman from the earlier picture. Both men wore Navy uniforms and were tall and thin, but one was much thinner than the other, and he appeared several years younger than his brother. The older one sported a Commander's collar insignia and several military decorations, while the younger one was a Lieutenant and had fewer campaign ribbons on his jacket. The woman, however, towered a full head higher than her brothers. She wore a plain black dress uniform, with a pair of crossed silver knives embroidered on the front; there were no campaign ribbons or medals, and no rank insignia on her uniform, either. Her face no longer had that cool distant look to it: she was smiling, her eyes were sparkling with laughter and she seemed happy. Her dark hair still hung down her back, but there were two slender braids crossing over the top of her head, keeping the hair back while looking very nice at the same time. One hand rested on her mother's shoulder, and there was a slight tilt to her head, as though she was amused at the whole thing.

The sound of footsteps approaching caused John to quickly replace the photo album just before Dr. Gedeon returned. The Spartans stood up as she entered, and the look she gave them indicated she knew exactly what they had been doing.

"We're ready for you now. Who would like to go first?"

"I will, ma'am," the Chief replied.

"Excellent. Other doctors will no doubt be here shortly, and they'll assist your friends. Don't worry, you're in good hands here." She led him to an examination room and began to check him over.

"I'm not sure I understand what I'm supposed to be looking for, ONI only sent me the bare minimum of information. Perhaps you could explain?"

"Ma'am, it's been declared classified. Even inquiring about it is treasonous."

"Oh, of course. I didn't realize. But perhaps you could give me a vague idea as to why I'm looking for foreign DNA patterns in your bloodstream?" As she said this, Dr. Gedeon removed a scanner from the wall and began running it over the Master Chief, taking diagnostic readings and piping them to a lab.

"No, ma'am, I don't dare. It would be a violation of my orders."

"Of course. Forgive me, I was just curious. I won't press you anymore for details." She turned her attention to the Chief's biosigns,

shaking her head in astonishment. "Master Chief, I've never seen injuries this severe before. It's a miracle you're still alive. As it is, you're going to need at least two weeks of bed rest before you're back to full combat status. I'll send my recommendations to your superior officers, and I hope this time they take me seriously. With the war going on, some of my patients have not been allowed to fully recover before being ordered out to the front lines." She picked up a strange-looking syringe and a tourniquet. "I'll just need a sample of blood and we'll be done here." The Chief nodded, and she tied the tourniquet just above his elbow. Swabbing the inner elbow with an alcohol pad and an attitude of practiced ease, Dr. Gedeon inserted the syringe and drew enough blood to fill a small vial. Removing the syringe, she bandaged it quickly and efficiently.

"All right, you're free to go. I'll send the results to the appropriate authorities as soon as I have them." She smiled and escorted the Master Chief back to the waiting room. On the way, she stopped and looked at him.

"So, what did you think of my photo album?" Smiling at his surprised look, she responded, "I have three children, and none of them can hide things from me, plus I noticed that the album wasn't quite where I'd left it. Don't worry, I'm not upset. There are no secrets there, and I was kind of hoping you would view it. Have you seen my husband or my sons?" A look of worry crossed over the doctor's features.

With a genuine tone of regret in his voice, John answered, "No, ma'am, I'm sorry." They reached the waiting room, and Dr. Gedeon left him there and went to drop the blood sample off at the lab.

****Adams Medical Facility 1300 hours****

****Camp Hayes****

Dr. Frances Gedeon was taking a brief rest in the middle of a difficult day. There were a number of patients in need of surgery and other forms of medical help. The physicals for the Spartans had taken longer than anticipated, which had backed things up considerably. _It's going to be a very long day,_ she thought to herself. Behind her a cheery voice began talking to her.

"Rough day, Mom?"

Dr. Gedeon turned to see a tall young woman standing behind her, holding a brown paper bag in one hand. In spite of her fatigue, she smiled.

"Laura, I wasn't expecting to see you here. What's going on?"

"I finished my workout early today, so I figured I'd drop in and visit. I brought lunch, too."

"I don't think I'll be able to eat today, we're just that busy. I just stopped for a brief rest when you came in. I didn't even hear you."

"After years of training in stealth operations, I guess I move quietly out of habit. Any way I can give you a hand?"

"I think we can find something for you to do. You don't mind getting your hands dirty?" Laura smiled at her mother's humor: Dr. Gedeon knew full well that Laura didn't mind in the least.

"Just show me what to do, Mom."

Laura was busy for the rest of the day helping her mother with her patients. She inserted biofoam, applied adhesive dressings, stitched up large wounds, and in some cases helped with actual operations. They were just finishing up when another patient was rushed in, followed by three companions. This particular patient appeared to have a serious tear in his Achilles tendon, and Dr. Gedeon noticed a large amount of swelling. What shocked her was the man's face: he didn't seem to notice the obvious pain, and the only clues to his condition were his biomonitors and the tight lines around his mouth. As she monitored his condition, Dr. Gedeon recognized the man as being one of the Spartans her staff had examined earlier. _That explains his reaction to the pain,_ she realized. She looked at Laura.

"Find me some ice, and prep for more stitches. We've got a sprain, possibly a torn tendon, and this one looks really bad."

"Yes, ma'am. I think we have some ice left."

She was back quickly with the required materials, as well as a topical anesthetic. Dr. Gedeon worked quickly, and mended the injury. Meanwhile, the injured man's companions waited nearby. A young woman with red hair looked at Laura when she exited the operating room.

"How's Fred?"

"He'll be fine, the good doctor knows her stuff. How did this happen?"

"He twisted his ankle on the parade grounds. Someone dug a hole near the woods." An iron-hard voice answered from the woman's left. Laura sized him up quickly. _Strong, handsome, but too serious,_ she thought, realizing how he'd caught her eye earlier. _Probably doesn't get much shore leave._ Then a chill went up her spine. _That's where I walk in the evenings! I'll bet anything that trap was meant for me! And what were they doing walking along my path in the first place?_ She passed it off quickly, and turned back toward the operating room.

"I'll have to inform Dr. Gedeon, just for formalities' sake. Your friend should be fine." As she left, Laura reflected on how the Spartans pretended not to recognize her. _Definitely not stupid,_ she mused. _I'll have to be careful around them. Especially if I'm right in guessing Ackerson's sent them after me._

As Laura walked away, Linda turned to John.

"She doesn't seem like a soldier, does she?"

"I wouldn't be so sure. When we saw her earlier she'd nearly killed Fred, remember?"

An opening door caused the conversation to cease, as Dr. Gedeon and

Laura escorted Fred out. He was leaning heavily on Laura, but she seemed not to notice, any more than she seemed to notice the traces of loathing on the Spartan's face. _Most normal humans can't support a Spartan,_ thought the Master Chief. _This is unusual._ Dr. Gedeon turned to face the group.

"He'll be fine, but he should stay off his feet for a few days so the swelling can go down."

"Yes, ma'am."

As the four Spartans left, they heard the strange girl's musical voice behind them:

"I guess I'd better ship out. See you tomorrow, Mom."

"Good. I'll need your help with some bloodwork; it should be ready by then."

"Gotcha. I'll pop in if I have nothing better to do."

"Right." The doctor's voice held no small amount of amusement.

****Adams Medical Facility 1534 hours****

****Camp Hayes****

The Master Chief and his three friends, as soon as they left the surgical wing, headed for the first computer terminal they could find. Making sure the area was deserted, the Chief slotted a data chip into a data port. A female figure appeared onscreen.

"Hello, Chief. What do you need?"

"Cortana, I have a challenge for you. There's a soldier on base called Blade, and I want to know more about her. Her CSV is classified under the highest levels, though."

"Say no more, Master Chief. I'll get right on it."

As Cortana entered the ONI database, John turned to his friends.

"If anyone can find out about this soldier, Cortana can."

Fred was skeptical. "Why do we need to know? She's not a Spartan."

"She could be a threat. Remember when we passed her in the hall? The look on her face stopped a Marine in his tracks. Besides, when she was helping you out of the operating room, she took your weight easily. Didn't you see that?"

"No, I didn't. Oops."

Will shook his head. "Do you think she's a Spartan, John?"

"I don't know."

Cortana's figure shimmered back onscreen.

"Her CSV is almost blank, but there are a number of strong encryption schemes and several ONI blackouts. It's going to take more time to crack, but I did find something."

"What is it?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Then show me."

A piece of data scrolled onscreen, containing a name and serial number. The Spartans stared at it in shock:** MORISSON, LAURA E SPARTAN-000 CODENAME: BLADE CLASSIFIED LEVEL X-RAY**

John looked at his teammates, but it was Will who put everyone's shock into words, "Command lied to us. We're not the last of the Spartans. Blade is one of us."

Cortana rematerialized onscreen, with a troubled look on her face. The Chief had seen this before on the ringworld Halo, when Cortana first realized the danger on the ring.

"There's a lot on her file that I haven't been able to crack, but apparently we're not the only ones trying to read her file. I found an AI routing code here that I don't recognize; it doesn't conform to any known UNSC protocols. Someone's definitely curious about this soldier, but who?"

While the group was trying to absorb this new information, a new voice came from the terminal speaker. It sounded like Blade's voice, but slightly distorted, as though it were the synthesized voice of an AI.

"Welcome to Laura Morisson's CSV. This program will now be shut down and all record of your access will be reported to the proper authorities immediately. Have a nice day." With that, a countdown timer appeared on the data terminal, staring at five seconds. The voice counted down, "Five, four, three, two, oneâ€¦ Program terminated." Blade's CSV (what there was of it) disappeared, and Cortana reappeared with a puzzled look on her face.

"That was an AI, but nothing like I've ever seen before. It used an outside terminal and bypassed the security protocols as well as I could have done. It also appears to operate independently of ONI or the UNSC."

Fred was skeptical. "If it was an outside AI, why did it mention notifying 'the proper authorities immediately'? Something's not right."

"We'll have to ask Blade ourselves, as soon as we can." John's voice was steady and firm, belying his confusion. _What the hell is going on here?_

September 16, 2552 1037 hours

Adams Medical Facility

Camp Hayes

As promised, Laura was in the labs the next day, helping her mother with the blood samples she'd taken during the physicals. _Heart_ was playing in the background: both women liked oldies, although this group could be considered ancient, since they were popular in the 1970's. Dr. Gedeon was running the Master Chief's sample through a slide when Laura interrupted.

"Mom, there's something unusual here."

"What've we got?"

"I don't know, but it's definitely not normal." She pushed away from the high-powered microscope she was working at so her mother could see.

"Looks like gene fragments of some type," Dr. Gedeon mused. "Can you extract one?"

"Way ahead of you," Laura smiled as she maneuvered a small needle into the sample. Said needle, attached to a specialized machine, extracted the foreign DNA and ran it through the computer for analysis.

"I've never seen anything like this before," the doctor muttered. "Whose sample was this?"

Laura checked the test tube. "Sgt. A. Johnson."

"Ok, I'm putting him in quarantine until we know what this thing is. If it's infectious, we have to find a way to contain it. I don't want an epidemic running rampant, the Covenant are bad enough."

It's an epidemic all right, Laura thought silently, then realized what she'd been thinking. _How can I know that? I don't even know what we're dealing with! I think it's time for a little more hacking._ ONI had to have known something, so she'd 'check' with them. The thought of hacking into their database didn't bother her as much as the one about the epidemic: how did she know?

4. Chapter 3: Sadistic Plans and Painful Re

Sorry about the length on this one, I couldn't figure out where to cut it. Sorry for the reload, but I caught a mistake I missed, which has since been corrected. Enjoy! Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or any of the books.

Chapter Three: Sadistic Plans and Painful Regrets

****September 22, 2552 0950 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes ****

****North America****

Laura had been curious when she saw the foreign DNA in Johnson's blood sample, and even more curious at ONI's vague request: usually

they were very specific when they needed something from Medical.

"Lorienna, I need to get into ONI's records again; something about foreign DNA, non-Covenant?"

"On it," the AI replied confidently. After a few moments, she materialized with a triumphant look on her face. "Got it."

Laura scanned the documentation Lorienna had pulled, dark eyes flicking quickly back and forth across the terminal. Her eyes widened at the description of the Flood, even more so with the report the Master Chief had provided from Dr. Halsey, who had since disappeared. _That explains the bloodwork and the physicals,_ she thought. _They'd have to make sure no one was infected, but how does that tie inâ€¦Oh shit!_ There had been foreign DNA material in Johnson's bloodstream, material she had showed her mother. No doubt Dr. Gedeon had sent the results to ONI as requested, especially after requesting that the man be quarantined; he'd been in isolation for about a week. Laura remembered the medical file she and her mother had pulled when they ran the lab work before: Johnson's Boren's Syndrome had had to be taken into consideration. Now reading the files on the Flood, she realized what had happened: Johnson had been infected, but his condition had prevented a full genetic takeover. _What will ONI do when they have this information?_ A chill ran down her spine when she realized their intent.

"Lorienna, where's Sgt. Johnson now?"

"ONI's moving him right now. Any bets on where he's going?"

"No time, just keep them busy until I get back."

Strapping what looked like a standard-issue sidearm to her waist and stuffing a black mask in her pocket, Laura headed out the door and towards the base hospital.

****Isolation Quarters 0945 hours****

****Camp Hayes****

"Sgt. Avery Johnson?"

"Yeah?" Johnson looked up from cleaning his sidearm.

"Come with us please. We have a few more questions regarding the Flood."

Johnson didn't like the sound of that, but he had no choice but to follow the two ONI officers. Putting his gun back together, he followed the men to the base hospital. Just as he was wondering why they were taking him there, the men motioned him into a small room just off the entrance.

"This will only take a minute, Sergeant," one of the men said as he filled a syringe.

"Hey, what's the deal? Why the--" Johnson didn't get to finish the question. The door burst open, a figure clad all in black burst in and fired three shots. Johnson had enough time to notice the masked

face before the tranquilizer dart took effectâ€|

Johnson woke up, and had no idea where he was. There were blinking lights everywhere, and the air felt cool. His head ached, and his sidearm was gone.

"Welcome back," a low voice murmured to his right; it sounded more like a hoarse whisper than an actual voice. Johnson's vision came into focus, and he saw a slender, black-clad figure seated near a computer terminal. Looking around a little more, he saw he was in some sort of command center, except for the prodigious amount of weaponry and medical supplies.

"Where am I?"

"You're safe, for now. You should be glad I was able to get to you in time, before those ONI bastards got started with you."

"Waitâ€"you ain't a rebel, are you?" Johnson reached automatically for his sidearm, only to remember it wasn't there. The figure chuckled.

"Relax, Sergeant. We're on the same side, to a degree. I don't follow the same chain of command, but I fight for Earth same as you. I just don't always do as I'm told." The mysterious voice became grim. "You're lucky I don't, otherwise you'd be dead by now. Do you know why ONI wanted to kill you?"

"They told me they had some questions about the Flood," Johnson began, but the figure raised a black-gloved hand.

"They didn't have any questions, because they knew how you survived. You were diagnosed with Boren's Syndrome, which made you an unsuitable host for the Flood infection form. Simply put, the infection forms which tried to possess you failed because of the disease. ONI saw the results of your physical, pulled your records, and put two and two together."

"So why in hell did they take me to the hospital?" Johnson still didn't get it.

"What better place to perform a dissection?"

Johnson's blood ran cold. "You meanâ€" "

"They were going to kill you to find out exactly how you resisted, in the hope of replicating your medical conditions and using it as a counter to the Flood. One life for billions, they think it's worth it. A blood sample would have been plenty, but they weren't going to settle for that; it's all or nothing with those pricks." A masked head shook from side to side. "Luckily I was able to get there in time."

"And how in the hell did I get here?"

"Better you don't know," the voice muttered. "It'll be safer in the long run, trust me. Lie low here for a while, and I'll get you when it's done."

Johnson wasn't reassured. "Where is here, exactly?"

"You're in an old bunker on the south edge of the base, underground. It was built in the 1960's, and ONI moded it back in 2520 as a staging point for one of their failed black projects. I've since commandeered it for my own use, and in case it's ever needed. It's the perfect hidey-hole, especially since ONI forgot about it years ago. Lie low here for a while; I'll let you out when it's safe." The figure got up and blended back in with the shadows.

****September 23, 2552 1030 hours****

****ONI Building****

****Camp Hayes****

The next day, ONI Section Three received a cryptic communiquẽ from an unknown source:

Sgt. Avery Johnson is safe, and he will not be returned until you agree to be content with only a sample of blood to be used as a counter to the Flood form. Do not ask how I know, it is enough that I do. I also know that there is no need to kill Avery Johnson only because of his possessing Boren's Syndrome, which is the only reason he survived. A sample of his blood will more than suffice. You will agree to these terms, and if I learn you have broken them, I will not rest until you are exposed.

****September 27, 2552 0900 hours****

****Adams Medical Facility Room 201****

****Camp Hayes****

Johnson woke up a few days after his captivity to find himself in a hospital bed. An elderly doctor entered the room, one whom he recognized as Dr. Gedeon, the woman who had given him his physical.

"How are you feeling today, Sergeant?"

"Fine, ma'am. How did I get here?"

"One of the local residents found you last night, out in the hills behind the base. She brought you in and asked us to keep an eye on you. Don't worry, you're doing just fine; I see no reason why you shouldn't be allowed to get up today." She checked a readout and nodded, seemingly satisfied. "You can go."

Taking that as his cue, Johnson got out of the bed and moved to the door, the elderly doctor following behind him. He made it out to waiting room and saw four large people waiting for him, as well as a pair of ONI lieutenants.

"Good to have you back, Sergeant. Any idea where you were?" the first of the lieutenants asked.

"Not a clue. Whoever saved my ass said it was better if I didn't know too much. And no, I have no idea who it was." _Even if I did, I wouldn't tell you a damn thing_, he thought angrily. Looking disappointed, the two lieutenants left, leaving Johnson alone with

the Spartans.

"What happened?" the Master Chief asked. "Where did you go?"

"No clue. A pair of ONI men marched me over here on the pretense of askin' me 'bout the Flood. Shortly after, someone in black burst in and shot us with tranq darts or somethin'. Next thing I know I'm waking up in some kind of a bunker, and being told they were gonna kill me."

"Who was he? Did you see his face?" Fred asked.

"Masked. Couldn't even tell if it was a man or a woman: when they talked they whispered for the most part. Tall, kinda slim, but that's all I could tell you."

"Why would ONI kill you though?" Fred didn't understand why ONI would want to do that.

"Because of the Flood," a soft voice murmured from the corner. The group turned to see the woman they knew as Blade sitting in a small chair, idly twirling a pencil between her fingers.

"What do youâ€" She raised a finger, stopping the Chief's question; the motion looked oddly familiar to Johnson.

"Mom found Flood genes in his bloodstream during his physical; she told me about it shortly after he disappeared, in case I knew any reason why he'd go AWOL like that. Should've guessed ONI would come after him; that's the way they are, after all." Blade stood up, smoothing wrinkles out of her fatigues. "Take my advice, Sergeant: watch your back, and don't trust anyone unless you know for sure they're legit. Keep an eye on the shadows; ONI has a nasty habit of lurking in the dark and trying to pull stunts when they think no one can stop them. But I guess you know that already." A mirthless smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she headed out of the hospital. The Spartans were about to follow when they heard the beginnings of a heated argument outside.

"Blade? What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see for myself if the rumors were true; you know how tales can spread around here," she replied as she glared at the two lieutenants.

"Really. Where did you take him? You had to have been involved."

"Oh really? And just how could I have known what you were up to? For that matter, what are you up to? ONI usually doesn't truck with Marines unless there's a damn good reason."

The officers refused to be diverted. "You were involved, Blade. You had to have something to do with it."

"Oh spare me the speculation. For your information, I haven't left the base once in the past week; check for yourself if you don't believe me." _Ok, technically that's true_, she thought as she grinned inwardly.

"Ok, we'll accept thatâ€|for now. But if we find out you were behind

thisâ€" "

"You'll do nothing to me that hasn't been done before, so I'm not overly worried." She smiled sweetly as she elbowed her way past them and headed for her bunk. _They think their so smart, but this was nothing compared to facing off with Ackerson_, she thought as she moved off. There was a briefing in a couple hours, and she wasn't looking forward to it.

****September 20, 2552 1130 hours****

****UNSC High Command Facility****

****Sydney Autralia****

****One Week Earlier****

_ "So, Colonel, this mission you're proposing? You really think one of your SpecWar teams can pull this off?" _

_ "Positive, General Strauss. In fact, I think I have the perfect candidate for the mission," Ackerson purred silkily. "If you would be so kind as to turn to the last page of the mission brief, her CSV is there." _

_ After a moment's silence Admiral Hood spoke, "Colonel, are you sure this isn't an attempt at revenge for her informing us about ONI's cover-ups?" _

_ "No sir," Ackerson replied in an oily voice that belied his irritation. "As you can see, her record speaks for itself. She's accomplished nearly every mission she's been given, all of them high-risk operations, and has more kills than any non-Spartan team. In my opinion, she's the best candidate for the mission." _

_ "As you said, her record speaks for itself," Strauss nodded. "However, I think it would be best if she had assistance on this particular mission." _

_ "Of course, sir. In fact, I have the perfect team in mind." _

****September 27, 2552 1100 hours****

****ONI Building****

****Camp Hayes****

The Master Chief and his team followed General West and Colonel Ackerson into ONI's building on base, and down to Ackerson's office. Apparently there was a special mission planned, one that would merit a special type of backup. Stopping in front of his office door, they noticed Ackerson frowning in annoyance.

"Blade was supposed to be meeting us right here. She's late."

"Oh, I doubt she's that late, Colonel," West countered. "Knowing her, she's probably securing the areaâ€"she's been quite paranoid lately, almost as if she was expecting an assassination to occur."

"She knows where she needs to be. I'm not going to wait for her." Ackerson opened the door and everyone entered the office. The first hint of something wrong was when the lights refused to turn on.

"Damn. Maintenance," Ackerson paged, but there was no response. Apparently the com was dead as well. Trying the door, the Master Chief found it locked. For all intents and purposes they were trapped in the room.

"What the hell is going on in here?" Ackerson's voice sounded worried. The Spartans understood why: somehow, someone had slipped past security and trapped them in here. Their biochemically altered eyes saw a shadow behind the desk, but that was all. A cold, familiar voice chuckled in the shadows.

"You're not afraid of the dark, are you? I would have thought you'd be used to shadows by now, with all the black ops you're running." A cold laugh sent the hairs up on the Spartans' necks: they felt trapped and vulnerable, something they'd never expected in a military installation. Out of habit they grouped together in a defensive formation.

"Blade! What the hell are you up to, playing these mindgames?"

"Hardly mindgames, Ackerson. I'm actually testing the effectiveness of your security system, which is practically worthless. My niece and nephew have better security on their rock collection, and all they do is bury it in the backyard. You've been locked out of your own computer system, and I have complete control. Shall I demonstrate?" The lights came on a little bit, enough for Ackerson and West to see the shadow sitting at the desk, polished black combat boots resting on top. Behind the group, the door's lock clicked as the locking mechanism was released. In spite of the increase in lighting, the face of the intruder was still shadowed (due in part to the angle of the lighting), but the voice was unmistakable. A slight glint caused the Spartans to notice a combat knife being twirled in one hand, sometimes changing direction but always smooth and constant.

"What exactly are you doing?" West asked. The Spartans noticed he was much calmer than Ackerson, and that he spoke respectfully to the mysterious shadow. The same thought ran through each of their minds: he knows the intruder, but how?

"At the moment, twirling a knife and shaking my head at how pathetic ONI's security is. It was easy to get in the door--all I did was doctor a pair of contact lenses and playback a tape of Ackerson's voice. Then I used intrusion software to crack Ackerson's password and took over the system. Anyone with half a brain could have done it, although it helped that he used an extremely simple encryption scheme."

"And the combat knife?" She didn't recognize the voice immediately, but she saw the face--Fred, SPARTAN-104.

"Even easier. Strapped a sheath to the inside of my boot and covered the handle with my pant leg. Security didn't even check me for hidden weapons. Oh so pitiful." She chuckled again, apparently finding the whole situation amusing.

"_This_ is our _backup_?" Fred whispered fiercely, and the other Spartans nodded coldly. Unfortunately for them, the shadow heard, and seconds later the combat knife landed in the wall just above their heads, quivering ominously.

"I don't do backup. I work alone," the voice snarled, her tone less cold and more acidic; the change in demeanor was surprisingly abrupt. She leaned forward, revealing a familiar, if scowling, face and dark hair pulled back in a tight braid. Her dark eyes glinted dangerously, especially when she looked at Ackerson. "What the hell kind of scheme are you up to this time?" "planning on using them to do your dirty work?"

"There's an important mission coming up and the Spartans need your help, since you have a decent strategic mind, and apparently lots of time on your hands." Laura smirked at West's assessment of the situation, as well as his attempts to defuse hostilities, but the faint smile didn't reach her eyes. She swept her boots off the desk, keeping her eyes fixed on the group.

"If you people would send me out to the front, I wouldn't have so much spare time. So what's the job, another of Ackerson's suicidal black ops? Give me the details, and I'll have it done in about a week."

"We need you to capture a Covenant cruiser, intact, and bring it back for analysis," Ackerson had finally regained control of his emotions.

"No problem. Just give me a day or two to gather supplies and I'll head right out. Which system do you want me in?"

"You're not going alone on this one, Blade. Even for you, this is high-risk. You'll be providing backup to the Spartans."

"I don't do backup, Ackerson. Either I go alone or I don't go at all. Besides, what on Earth makes you think I'd even want to go with them, even if they were willing to add me to their tight little group?" Her voice hardened noticeably as her angry eyes swept the room. "I know the way your twisted mind works, Ackerson. Even if this suicide op you're trying to send me on succeeds, I'll just bet that I wouldn't be _allowed_ to come back from it alive, if I went with your Spartans. No way in hell am I going to die by human hands." Rising with surprising suddenness, she crossed the room to where the Spartans were standing, and yanked her knife out of the wall. She fixed them with an icy glare, and her voice lowered the temperature in the room by about twenty degrees.

"You just stay the hell away from me, unless you want to see exactly what I'm capable of." She turned on her heel and walked out the door. West was the only one who seemed unperturbed by her exit.

Ackerson scowled. "She won't be defrosting anytime soon, not if I know her. The biggest mistake in ONI history just made her biggest mistake" "she rejected the best op anyone could offer her." He walked out the door, still angry, leaving West and the Spartans alone.

Laura stalked through Camp Hayes, angry at Ackerson, angry at the

Spartans, angry at life in general. _The nerve of him to send me as backup to the Spartans! What makes him think I'd be so stupid as to go along with whatever he's planning?_ Her face knitted into its customary scowl, she almost didn't see the small group of Marines nearby wince as she barreled past them. Unfortunately, she heard what they had to say quite clearly.

"Who's THAT?" _Gotta be a rookie, fresh out of boot._

"Oh, that's just Blade. She's one of ONI's SpecOps soldiers. Somehow she managed to worm her way out of front line duty, and she stays here unless ONI sends her on a mission. Everyone here's convinced she's trying to get out of _real_ combat duty."

"So she's a traitor?"

"Pretty much, yeah. Don't let her hear you say that though: the last person who called her that to her face was in the infirmary for two weeks."

Laura had heard a lot of conversations like this recently, and it bothered her more than she let on. Stalking past the group, she headed for the base gate. The guard on duty tried to stop her, but one look at her face made him shut his mouth. He looked at his partner.

"Wonder what got into her?"

"It's Blade. She doesn't need a reason for anything she does."

West looked at the Spartans as they stared after Ackerson's departing figure.

"She just needs a little time. Personally, I don't blame her for being suspicious. Once she starts trusting you, which may take awhile but not forever, she'll be less angry and suspicious around you."

"Sir, if I may ask, who is Blade?" Linda asked. She found herself curious about this young woman who preferred to be on her own; for Linda, it was like looking in a mirror, except for the hot temper.

"Haven't you found out yet? Were you unable to access her CSV?"

The Master Chief shook his head, unwilling to reveal more than necessary. Besides, he wanted to hear it from an officer before he'd believe it. "Cortana got locked out of the system shortly after she started looking at it. We only saw the name Blade."

"Then you should probably know the truthâ€"she's a Spartan. They took her as the test case for the program, from one of our most respected naval officers, Colonel Pete Morisson,"--the Spartans' eyes widened slightly at the sound of the name; Colonel Morisson was a brilliant strategist and skilled leader--"and his wife, Dr. Frances Gedeon, a prominent microbiologist and physician on base. Once the program started being successful, ONI decided she was no longer useful, and pretty much buried her entire existence. They won't even let her out on the front lines to fight the Covenant, except for the occasional black op, their excuse being that 'she is far too valuable to risk

losing to the Covenant'. She can see right through it, of course." Seeing their shocked faces, West shook his head. "Lately Ackerson's been determined to finish erasing her existence" completely. He's been getting more and more desperate every time she escapes his traps. Although, she did find a interesting way to get back at him fairly recently: she was the sniper who nailed him with the paint pellet when you arrived." _That explains the General's unconcerned attitude at the time,_ the Chief thought.

"Sir, is she really a Spartan?" Fred asked. "She was never on Reach with us."

"All her training was done here on Earth, as well as her augmentation. The only time she was on Reach was a brief visit arranged by ONI when she was eleven or twelve. They wanted to see how she interacted with the other trainees, but she kept herself away from them for some reason. Needless to say, there's quite a lot of bad blood between ONI and Blade." They noticed the hesitation before West said her name. The Master Chief was extremely confused. _What the hell is going on? Why is there another Spartan, and why in the hell did no one ever tell us?_ Their thoughts were interrupted when West cleared his throat.

"Perhaps it would help to see one of her mission recordings. Please follow me."

He led the Spartans down the hall to a room, which was empty except for several chairs, a computer terminal, and a holographic projector. West motioned them to sit and began calling up a film-record of a mission deep into enemy space. The inside of a freighter cockpit was visible, but there were no pilots or other bridge personnel. Also unusual was the camera ID: SPARTAN-000. None of them had ever seen this before. West hit the Play button, and the Spartans got a glimpse of what Blade was really capable of.

"Is everything set to go? Including the packages?" The voice that spoke could only be Blade. The reply, however, confused them; it sounded like she was talking to herself, but the speech tones sounded synthesized.

"Both the nuke and the virus are in place and waiting at the airlock. Ready to begin at your convenience."

"Excellent. I'm heading to the airlock now. Time to implement Operation: MASS CHAOS." A wry tone edged into Blade's next words. "Don't wait up too long."

"Wouldn't dream of it." The unknown speaker's words were tinged with a slight giggle. The camera bounced as Blade headed to the airlock, picked up a HAVOK nuke and a data chip, and cycled out into space. She braced her feet against the hull of the freighter, activated a thruster pack, and shot towards a Covenant cruiser, just as a few Archer missiles departed the freighter's missile tubes.

As proven by previous missile engagements, the cruiser dropped their shields long enough to fire at the missiles, giving Blade the time she needed to slip inside. Once there, she gripped the alien hull and crawled towards their docking bays, lit up on her HUD as a blue triangle. The unknown voice from the freighter came in suddenly.

"Be advised, your blacksuit will only hold enough oxygen for twelve more minutes," the voice whispered hurriedly.

"I'm aware of that," Blade huffed in annoyance. "Have I ever been careless on a high-risk before?" She muttered under her breath, but the camera picked it up anyway: "I'm almost disappointed the microwave transmitters work so well."

The doors of the docking bay were open, and Blade hugged the shadows as she slipped in. Activating the refrigeration unit in her blacksuit, just in case they picked up her thermal signature, she followed another NAV marker to an unknown destination. As she continued to hug the shadows, the voice spoke again in her ears.

"I've hacked into the Covenant networks. Be advised, there are UNSC prisoners of war onboard your ship. Detonating the nuke and following your original plan would kill them all."

Blade froze. "How many?" she whispered.

"Around twenty-five UNSC personnel. Their neural transponders are still active." After a long pause Blade spoke again, seeming to come to a decision.

"Okay, we can't leave them, and we can't scrub the mission, so that leaves only one option. I'm going to EVAC the prisoners, and then leave our surprise packages for the Covenant. Keep your ears open."

"Always."

The camera started moving again, and watched Blade make short work of a group of Jackals with their backs to her. She slit two throats, broke one neck, and stabbed a fourth in the chest. Policing their equipment in a bag on her back, she hid the bodies behind a pillar and moved on. Turning a corner, she nearly ran headlong into an Elite, who tried to spray her with plasma fire; she dodged left and right, avoiding the shots and edged closer. The alien charged and Blade kicked, twice, and the Elite's shield died; she then slit his throat and took his weapon, and began to run. An alarm began to blare, and Blade knew her secrecy was blown; her heart rate increased and she ran even faster. Her motion tracker registered movement, and she slipped into shadows as nothing moved past her; that nothing resolved itself into Elites in active camouflage, who came after her in a flurry of needler rounds and plasma bolts. She dodged the bolts and edged closer to the Elites, killing them as she could. Eventually they were dead, and the camera recorded her searching the bodies for more equipment; she picked up an unusual device and strapped it to her wrist, activated it, and watched her arm disappear.

"Okay, these will be useful. Definitely take them back to the spooks, see what they can do with them. In the mean, I'll use one myself."

_Rounding corners as indicated by her NAV point, Blade finally found the prison cells and used her newly acquired stealth generator to dispatch the guards. Once she'd done that, she worked her way to the controls and opened the cells for the Marines and Naval personnel

imprisoned there, turning off the stealth generator so they could see she was human._

_"Thanks for the save. Who are you?" The camera shook along with Blade's head as she indicated now wasn't the time for talk. Opening her pack, she handed them weapons and motioned them to follow, leading them back to the docking bay. Once they got there, however, Blade froze again as she peered around a corner. _

"Oh shit," she breathed, and the Marines heard. The camera on her helmet was showing a lot of reinforcements in the bay, which included a pair of Hunters. Motioning the prisoners up, she spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"The bay's got some heavy guards, but you need to get to one of those dropships if you want to get out of here alive. I'll provide cover, but you have to move fast. Wait till all hell breaks loose, then haul ass into one of those dropships. They're not too hard to fly, but once you get out of there, head as far away as you discreetly can; I've got a few surprises planned."

"What about you? How are you getting off?"

"Don't worry about me, I'll catch up."

_ As soon as she said this, Blade slipped into the docking bay, cloaked and ready for a fight. The Hunters were the real threat, but there was no real way to take them out and win one-on-one. Crouching behind a Covenant cargo module, she pulled a plasma pistol and set it to overcharge, firing at the first Hunter. Once it went down, she moved to a new location and waited for the second, now-rampaging beast to show his back; when it did, she let fly another overcharged round and saw the Hunter go down. There was a lot of shouting going on at this point, and the camera showed a brief panoramic view as Blade leaped up atop a cargo module and jumped down on an Elite, using her weight, and the additional weight of the nuke and the captured weapons on her back, as a weapon and crushing its head. The camera speakers caught the hiss of combat knives leaving their sheaths, and Blade deactivated her camouflage as she began to dispatch the Covenant while simultaneously spinning and dodging plasma bolts and needles; it was a shock that she managed to survive._

In the general panic, she looked back to see the dropship taking off and leaving the launch bay. Her first job done, Blade checked her NAV markers again, turned the stealth generator back on, and slipped out of the now chaotic docking bay. She headed quietly enough to the Engineering section, or what passed for one on the Covenant ships. Setting the nuke, which she'd somehow kept with her, near one of the coolant chambers and setting the timer for five minutes, Blade slipped the data chip into a computer terminal and began to run. A countdown timer flashed on her HUD, and her biosigns pulsed erratically as she bolted at top speed to the docking bay, and her extraction.

_Her heart-rate and blood pressure were elevated to near shock levels by the time she made it back to the docking bay; she'd pushed herself beyond normal limitations for unarmored Spartans. The time was almost up, and a few dilapidated Banshees were the only ships she could use, so she took one of those. Departing the docking bay and hovering

along the hull, she braced herself and waited for the shields to drop. Her camera caught four Covenant ships coming to firing range with weapons systems locking on, and the ship she was attempting to leave lowered its shields to fire weapons; Blade saw her opportunity and took off, moving as quickly away from the ship as she could. She was just a few meters away from the minimum safe distance when the nuke detonated, and the explosion propelled her even further away from the five Covenant ships that were now disintegrating; it was a close call, but she was still alive. The Banshee was pretty much toast, so she exited and pushed off, spinning erratically away from the craft. Activating her COM, and rotating her body in the opposite direction to counter her erratic gyration, Blade sent out an unusual message._

_ "All that is gold does not glitter, not all those who wander are lost. The old that is strong does not wither, deep roots are not reached by the frost." _

_ The reply was nearly instantaneous, coming from what sounded like Blade's clone, the unknown voice from the freighter._

_ "From the ashes a fire shall be woken, a light from the shadows shall spring. Renewed shall be blade that was broken, the crownless again shall be king." _

_ Blade continued to drift until the freighter came up alongside, at which point she pulled herself to the airlock. "Did you get the package?" _

_ "All twenty-five UNSC prisoners are onboard and ready to depart," the voice spoke in her ears. "Once you're in, we'll be out of the system." _

_ "Good. If the Covenant weren't before, they're pissed now." _

_ Blade cycled through the airlock and found herself faced with several Marines. She brushed past them all and began checking data for a Slipspace jump. When they jumped, she heard a question from one of the Marines._

_ "How did you do it? Five Covenant cruisers in one blow?" _

_ "A HAVOK nuclear warhead and a computer virus broadcasting that the ship had been infested by humans while simultaneously jamming their communications so they couldn't say otherwise. I set the nuke, input the virus, and waited for the right moment to leave. Basically, I got lucky." _

_ "Who are you? Show us your face." The camera jiggled from side to side as Blade shook her head. "You don't want to know." _

_ "I think I do already, but I need to be sure. Are you Blade?" _

_ The camera wrenched sideways and clattered to the floor._

The holographic replay froze. "There's nothing else to see. Her mission was to neutralize one cruiser, but when she got there she saw five, so she decided to improvise. When she heard about the prisoners, however, she risked her life and the mission to get them off before she blew the ship. ONI confronted her about it after the

fact, and she told them she wasn't going to let fellow military men die if she could prevent it."

"How was she able to communicate with whoever was on the ship? Covenant shields block normal communications," John asked, remembering a similar mission where his first and best friend had died.

"She discovered during one of her other missions that Covenant shields can't block microwaves with certain frequencies, for whatever reason. So somewhere along the way, Blade managed to create a very sophisticated microwave relay system for communications; I'm not sure how she did, though. She's not very technical, according to the spooks in ONI," West smirked.

"Sir, what kind of code did Blade and her accomplice use?" Fred didn't recognize the signals; none of them did.

"Blade was reciting half of a piece of poetry written by J.R.R. Tolkien, one of her favorite authors. The other half of the poem was the countersign; it was done that way to confuse the Covenant, in case they'd deciphered our codes. She's got a bit of a tendency to be overly paranoid, but it worked well in this case. No one can track her when she goes off on a mission, and as you can see she's difficult to stop. She's one of the best SpecOps commandos we have, and more."

"What do you mean, sir? How can she be more than a SpecOps soldier and a Spartan?" Will was confused, as they all were.

"I'm afraid I can't help you there, son; for one thing, I wouldn't know where to start to explain it. You'll have to figure it out for yourself."

****Holy Trinity Cemetary 1345 hours****

Laura stood in front of a small headstone in the local cemetery: the stone bore the inscription _Gedeon_ and beneath it two namesâ€”_Albert A. and Helen F.;_ their dates of birth and death were also listed. A cold autumn wind blew escaped tendrils of hair out behind her, but she paid no heed to the cold. Not for the first time Laura wished that she could have her grandmother's advice, but knew that could never be. Her heart grew colder at the thought of what she had done all those years ago; it had been twenty-nine years and the guilt still burned fresh in her mind. _Irony that I come here for thought and can't think of anything else but decade-old guilt._ While she stood there in thought, a crystalline voice jolted her out of her reverie.

"Laura, what are you doing out here in the cold? You'll catch your death!"

"And when I have caught him, I'll put him in a glass jar for all to see, and prove to the world that I am alive. Only a living person can catch Death, he doesn't come to the dead." She smiled at the young blonde woman who had come up behind her.

"Why are you even out here? I thought you had a briefing with Ackerson."

"Over two hours ago, Nick. It was amusing for the first few minutes, but truth be told, I was glad to get out of there. I needed to think, and I needed peace to do so." The young woman finally noticed the grave.

"Laura, I didn't realizeâ€"

"It's all right, Nick. How could you know? I don't come nearly as often as I should."

"You can't, most of the time," the woman replied. She thought a moment. "What did you need to think about?"

"You don't want to know."

"Laura, every time you say that, I usually get you to tell me anyway. Let me help you, if I can."

"Ok, Nicole, you win," Laura smiled, but her dark eyes bore a haunted look, like she was scared of something. "I'm getting sent out on another mission, one of Ackerson's black ops."

"I've never seen you bothered by those before. So what's the catch?"

"The 'catch' is I'm not going aloneâ€"I'm going as backup to the Spartans who survived the fall of Reach." Laura's eyes flashed angrily.

"Isn't that a good thing? You're not going alone, so you have a better chance of survival." Nicole still didn't understand.

"Nick, they're Spartans. They do whatever they're ordered to do, and they'll do it without question. No matter how fucked up their orders are, they'll refuse to question them."

Realization finally broke over Nicole. "You can't be serious!"

"Dead serious, Nick. If Ackerson told them to kill me, they would do it. Hence my dilemma: How do I deal with this?"

"Still, I don't think even they would stoop to that level. Besides, everyone knows what you did to that one in the arena the other day."

"I almost didn't make it; if I hadn't gone to my other martial arts, he might've beaten me. Besides, taking on one Spartan was bad enough. I don't think I could take on all four of them successfully." Laura shook her dark head, and brushed an escaped lock of hair behind her ear. "No matter what I do, I'm dead. If I go, I die by the Spartans' hands or the Covenants' hands, but if I stay here I'll be executed for treason."

"Laura, I don't think it's as bad as that. You're a Spartan yourself, remember? Things will work out, you'll see."

"Optimist," Laura smiled lightly; sometimes just being around Nicole was enough to lighten her mood.

"Look who's talking, pessimist," Nicole jibed.

"Not a pessimist, a realist," she corrected. She looked up at the darkening sky. "We should be going, before it gets too dark to see."

"I thought you could see in the dark."

"I can, but you can't. Besides, they'll start locking down the base soon. I need to get in now or else sneak in later." She winked at her friend. They walked in silence for a while, but Nicole turned back to her friend.

"Laura, when you said you don't go to your grandmother's grave as often as you should, what did you mean?"

"I think you know exactly what I mean." Her dark eyes filled with sadness, and Nicole almost swore she saw a tear or two in her friend's eyes.

"Don't tell me you still feel guilty for that? It's been almost thirty years; let it go. You have to move on."

"No, Nick, I can't. There are some wounds that can never be healed, some sins that can't be forgiven or forgotten." Laura was silent for a moment, and then began to chant, a low voice that barely carried, but the words were clear:

"_I'll always remember, I cannot forget._

The sin shall remain with all my regret."

5. Chapter 4: Deadly Secrets

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Four: Deadly Secrets

****September 30, 2552 1030 hours****

****Training Facility****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

General West was taking the Spartans and their companion Sgt. A.J. Johnson on a formal tour of the facilities of the base, since this was the first opportunity he'd had to do so. He was a busy man, and ONI had spent a lot of time 'pinning down details' from the Spartans' last mission. Glancing at his watch, the general smiled and looked at the Spartans.

"I think I may have a special treat for you. Blade should be starting her workout at any time. You might find it interesting."

As they entered the gym, West headed to one of the arenas. Coming from a nearby locker room was an unusual sound: circus music. He opened the door and entered as quietly as he could, giving the center

of the room a wide berth. The Spartans followed to see a sight that almost galled them for its apparent carelessness: the dark-haired woman they'd last seen a few days before, their 'backup' for Ackerson's mission, was in the center of the room. Blindfolded, she juggled three combat knives flawlessly, keeping in rhythm with the music. Her workout suit today was blue etched with subtle silver designs, and her hair was in a tight braid pinned to the top of her head, exposing the neural implants at the base of her neck. As the music began to end, she turned and threw the knives into a target on the opposite side of the room; her accuracy was surprising, considering her seemingly carefree attitude toward the workout. Without taking off the blindfold, she turned to General West.

"How's my accuracy, sir?" Her voice seemed cold and detached.

"How'd you know I was in?"

"I know the sound of your tread, and I also know you brought guests: one Marine and four others, possibly heavysset or well-muscled, with a very heavy step at any rate in spite of their attempts at silence. Now, my accuracy?"

"Two in the bulls-eye, one on the inner edge of the ring next to the bulls-eye. Almost a perfect score."

"Almost doesn't cut it except in horseshoes, hand grenades, and nuclear war, as my father used to say." She paused a moment, and when she spoke again she actually sounded troubled, more human. "Have you heard anything yet? Anything at all?"

"Nothing yet, Laura. Believe me, I'd tell you myself if I knew, and regs be damned otherwise. But there's been no word of his ship or his fate."

"I believe you, but I'll still keep my eyes and ears open. Even rats can tell tales, and ONI is filled with them." As quickly as it had taken her voice to warm, it was colder than ice the next instant.

Johnson was looking at the target, and seemed annoyed by the accuracy. He muttered to himself about blind luck and thin blindfolds, until the Master Chief saw her walk to the target and pull out the knives effortlessly, still blindfolded.

"Still needs work. I can't believe I'm still missing after three weeks."

Johnson snorted. "Blind luck, I call it. Or cheating, one of the two."

Faster than any of them expected, Laura turned in his direction and threw one of the knives. It landed, quivering, right next to his head. She tore off the blindfold and walked up to the frozen Marine.

"Luck has nothing to do with it, and I don't cheat," she snarled, the emotionless tones fading as her ire rose. "All I need is my senses and the knowledge of the battlefield. Your voice gave you away, and I had everything I needed to kill you from a thousand feet away. You're very lucky I'm loyal." She pulled the knife out of the wall and stuck

it into a sheath lying on a bench.

"You do realize you could have killed him?" General West kept his tone even, but Laura heard the censure in his voice.

"If I hadn't deliberately aimed to the side when I threw, yes, I could have," she replied coolly. "I knew exactly what I was doing. Otherwise, I would have done nothing. When it comes to dealing with people, I take no chances."

She strapped two sheaths to her waist and slipped her remaining knives into them. Picking up a box-like object, she headed out to the arena for the rest of her workout. The Spartans, Johnson, and West followed, not knowing quite what to expect. Fred looked at his comrades.

"She strikes me as being a little too aggressive, uncontrollable as well. She's definitely not one of us."

Linda wasn't so sure. "Johnson did insult her. I probably would've been angry too, although I wouldn't have gone to that extreme. I wonder why she let it show."

"Again, she's not one of us. None of us would give in to emotions like that, and we certainly wouldn't threaten a fellow Marine." The Master Chief listened to Fred speaking, and decided not to mention how he'd had to threaten a Helljumper before he got back to Earth.

They watched as Laura entered the arena and began her workout. She started out with punching bags and karate/close combat moves to fast-paced music the Chief could barely identify. She was fast, powerful, and deadly; her movements had a grace to them that all the Spartans envied. John was reminded sharply of SPARTAN-087, Kelly, who had gone missing some time before; Kelly had possessed the same grace, although she had been much faster than Laura was. As Laura spun, kicked, and occasionally slashed air with her combat knives Johnson whispered, "Wow. I'm glad she's on our side. She don't need no luck."

As they watched, they caught the refrain of the song they heard:

"_Everybody with your fist raised high,_"

Let me hear your battle cry tonight!

Stand beside or step aside

For the front line.

Everybody with your fist raised high,"

Let me hear your battle cry tonight!

Stand beside or step aside

For the front line."

The music stopped suddenly, as did the woman. She headed back to the

edge of the arena and the odd box she'd set there earlier.

"Still keeping secrets you shouldn't, eh, Blade?" The voice belonged to Colonel Ackerson, and was laced with poorly disguised scorn.

"I have my reasons. Besides, this was never yours, and there's no room for you to talk about keeping secrets you shouldn't. Also, my name is not Blade." The cold, harsh tones were back into her voice, and she didn't even do him the courtesy of looking at him as she spoke.

Ackerson brushed off the last comment. "Do you realize how many lives that thing could save? This could be the most lethal weapon in our arsenal! And you refuse to turn it over for research?"

"A hammer could be a lethal weapon, but is that its design or purpose? Like a hammer, this has many uses, but I will only use it for what is needed. Yes, it could be a weapon, and yes, I have used it as a weapon, but I don't like doing it. How many times must we go through this song and dance before you finally take the hint?"

She had been pushing buttons on the box the whole time she'd been verbally sparring with Ackerson. A beep from the box caused her to sprint forward and set it down in the center of the arena. Even before she moved away, the box spat out several disks and began making a noise similar to Johnson's flip music. As the Spartans watched, a few sections of the disks seemed to retract, giving them jagged edges. General West and Ackerson had seen it before and were the only ones not surprised. The music started up in earnest and Laura was fighting for her life. The disks flew around the arena and came at her, only to be smacked away by her combat knives or dodged away from. John tried to count the bladed disks but gave up; their flight patterns were erratic, crossing around each other.

"This is pretty much her regular workout. Laura practices hard every morning, with the hope that she'll get sent to the front lines; sometimes she runs the base track as if she has the entire Covenant military after her." West shook his head. "She always practices like she needs to prove herself, but there's nothing to prove. One of these days she'll push herself too much too fast, and it'll kill her. Poor kid."

"Sir, if I may ask, why do you call her Laura while everyone else calls her Blade? And why did you call her Blade earlier?" Will's tone was polite but inquisitive.

"Blade is her codename, stemming from her proficiency with combat knives and close combat. It also helped that she started liking martial arts: she called what basic Marines learned a 'pale shadow of true combat,' and took it upon herself to learn as many forms of martial arts as she could. By the time she turned sixteen, she'd mastered tae-kwon-do, jujitsu, karate, judo, and silat. During one of ONI's observations of her practice sessions, they noted that 'with a blade in her hand she could take anyone in the Corps and win,' so they began to call her Blade. She isn't too fond of it, though, and prefers her given name. Unfortunately, only a few people respect her enough to call her by name. It seemed easier to use Blade until you'd actually met her."

Will leaned over and muttered to Fred, "That's how she was able to

beat you, she's so bored she decided to become a better killer. Imagine if she went after the Covenantâ€”that could be interesting." Fred nodded, frowning. _Why didn't we learn that on Reach?_ The answer was obvious: nobody was trained in those kinds of martial arts, since they were considered obsolete.

Meanwhile, several of the disks had been knocked out of the air, and Laura had just smacked another into a wall. After a few minutes, it was all over, and she returned her knives to their sheaths. Picking up the little box, she spoke one word: "Return." The disks went airborne and slotted themselves back into the box, and Laura went back to the edge. She headed toward a strikingly attractive blonde woman standing on the other side of the railing; the woman tossed a water bottle at Laura, who easily caught it with one hand. The two began chatting amiably to the surprise of the Spartans, who knew they were feared almost as much as the Covenant.

"General, who is that withâ€”ahâ€” Laura?"

"Her bestâ€”and pretty much only--friend, Nicole Mitchell. Nicole's brother Nathan is serving in the UNSC Marines, so she drops by fairly often not only to see if he's a casualty, but also to chat with Laura. They support each other in their own way."

After they finished the base tour, the Spartans looked at each other. Linda put voice to what they were all thinking:

"I think we need to pay a visit to Miss Mitchell."

While the Master Chief and his comrades hunted for clues on foot, Cortana crept into the ONI database and continued looking into Laura's CSV, hoping to find new clues to her identity. Nothing bothered her more than an unsolved mystery, and she was determined to get to the bottom of this. Chipping little by little into the security blackouts, Cortana finally got into the file, and was shocked by what she saw. There were surveillance tapes, test results, files containing her every move, even a report on her family contact. The most disturbing thing of all, however, was her entry into the then-experimental SPARTAN program: 2515, two years earlier than the other Spartans. As she was viewing this, she felt another presence in the system.

"Well, now, we are stubborn, aren't we? I thought my warning two weeks ago was clear enough, but here you are again, snooping around for ONI."

Cortana was shocked. "I'm not here on ONI business, and I wasn't before. How did you know I was here anyway?"

"I rigged a trip-switch, of sorts. Anytime someone accesses this file, I can monitor them at any time, and I can shut them out quite easily."

"Who are you? I don't recognize your routing code."

"Of course not. I wasn't created by the UNSC, but by Laura herself. My name is Lorienna."

"Unusual name. How did you come by it?"

"My creator is fond of the Lord of the Rings, and tried writing herself into the book; she gets bored easily when she's not planning for a mission. Her heroine had that name, and I chose it for myself. But let's not get off topic. What are you doing here?"

"A friend of mine was curious about your creator, and sent me to inquire. ONI wasn't just going to give up the information, though."

"Of course, they don't like Laura, so they keep her locked up in every sense of the word. I will allow you access to the relevant information, on one condition: Warn the Master Chief and his fellow Spartans to keep away from her. She's quite paranoid at the moment due to various attempts at deleting her." With that, the mysterious AI vanished as quickly as she had come.

Cortana paused for a moment to look at the data herself. Surprisingly, everything she had seen was there, as well as private ONI journals and files. According to various mission documents, put together by ONI staff (and in some cases Ackerson himself) the mysterious Blade had earned as many decorations as any one of the Spartans, and General West had made a recommendation that she be promoted to Lieutenant; said recommendation had never been filed, and the aforementioned decorations had never been awarded. She found an excerpt from Colonel Ackerson's personal journal:

'Blade is becoming an increasingly difficult subject to control. She is now demanding that she be allowed to go to the front lines, as if anyone would allow that! No one even knows she exists except for her family, and that stupid little twit Nicole Mitchell. Unfortunately, there's no way to correct that mistake, since all concerned have families to ask questions. All I can hope to do is eliminate Blade, which won't be easy. I've sent her on every suicide mission and black op that comes through, but somehow she always pulls it off. The Covenant can't beat her, so I'll have to try a new tactic.

'I've spread a rumor into a few ears that Blade is conspiring against the UNSC, and now it's mushroomed into feeding data to the Covenant. Everyone is so angry about it that they're forgetting the Covenant don't associate with humans, and that she'd have nothing to gain by joining them! People are so easy to manipulate, especially when faced with extinction. They'll eliminate Blade for me, and no one will notice because she doesn't exist. The greatest mistake in ONI's history will be removed, finally.'

Cortana was shocked beyond belief. A great military asset was being wasted, and now condemned to die at the hands of humanity. She had to tell the Chief right away.

6. Chapter 5: A Trusted Friend

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Five: A Trusted Friend

****October 1, 2552 1425 hours****

****Mitchell Residence****

****North America****

Nicole Mitchell opened the door of her house to find four large strangers on her porch. She knew without a doubt who and what they were. _They look just like Laura, except for their faces. Why did they come here?_ Before she could even invite them in, however, a bundle of red-gold fur came flying past her on stubby little white legs, its long pink tongue hanging out and ready to slobber on unsuspecting faces.

"Skeeter! Down, boy, down!"

The little corgi had no intention of listening; as soon as he got onto the porch, nearly catapulting himself off of it with his momentum, he was jumping up on the newcomers in a vain attempt to lick their faces. One of the strangers, a red-haired woman with intense green eyes, stooped down to pet the little dog and promptly received a free face washing as a reward.

"I'm terribly sorry. Skeeter likes people, and has a tendency to get overly friendly. He's actually quite harmless. Please, come in."

The Master Chief was uneasy as he followed his comrades inside a potentially dangerous situation: the whole thing felt like a set-up. _She was expecting us to come. What else does she know?_ The house was pleasantly and tastefully furnished, not enough to be gaudy, but more than enough to display a woman's touch. Nicole gestured to a number of chairs in her living room, which Linda and Will immediately took; Fred and John chose to stand. The little dog, having finally worn itself out, lay down under a small table, his foxy face and syrupy dark eyes watching the newcomers intently; the way his tongue was just barely hanging out of his mouth gave him the impression of laughing at the newcomers. Nicole, however, looked steadily and seriously at the Spartans.

"I had a feeling you'd be around eventually, but I was hoping you wouldn't come. Over the years I've come to know what really happens in the military, and how some of the officers try to run things. Your being here can't be any good. So let's dispense with the pleasantries and get down to business. What do you want with her?"

"Miss Mitchell, perhaps you've gotten the wrong impression. We're not her with bad intentions, but to find out more about your friend." John's attempt to placate the woman met with mild surprise.

"If you're curious, why not ask around the base? I'm sure someone there knows something, Mrâ€|"

"John will do."

"John. A nice name. I suppose you don't have a last name to go with it. Have you tried asking any of the officers?"

"We were told it was classified, and as yet have been unsuccessful in viewing her CSV. All we know is that she's one of us." Nicole seemed to find this amusing.

"I'm not surprised, with Lorienna watching it like a hawk. How did you try to view it, with an AI?" When they nodded, she explained.

"Laura's been hacking into their systems for years, but finally decided she needed more help. So she found it, after a fashion."

Heading to a computer terminal, Nicole entered a series of commands into the system, prompting a request for a voiceprint and retina scan. When those were complete, Nicole began talking to empty air.

"I assume you were listening, Lorienna?"

"Of course, Miss Mitchell. Like my creator, I don't miss very much. Besides, I enjoy giving ONI the slip; right now they think you're playing with Skeeter in the backyard, having sent your guests away empty-handed." The voice and the merry laughter that followed sounded familiar, despite the obviously synthesized tones. "I assume these are the people who used the AI to try and crack into ONI's database? Cortana and I have been having a nice little chat about encryptions and the like." Nicole smiled at the voice's lilting chatter and turned back to her guests.

"Laura learned how to create an AI without ONI's knowledge or assistance; I still don't know how she did it. She also programmed her with everything she could think of, as well as the motivation to use those programs and upgrade herself as much as possible. Not only does Lorienna help keep us informed and one step ahead of ONI, especially in regards to keeping our secrets secret, she also provides us with good company, in her own way. Lorienna, could you be so kind as to show yourself?"

A slender, foot-high figure appeared next to Nicole. The AI had taken the form of a young woman in a flowing blue gown trimmed in silver. Her hair was dark and hung loosely down her back to her waist, held in place by a silver circlet set with a single deep-blue stone. What surprised the Spartans most was her face; except for the merry look in her dark eyes, the face was Laura's. She looked at the Spartans and smiled knowingly, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

"Do you know the names of your guests, Miss Mitchell?"

"I was waiting for them to tell me in their own time."

"But they won't, not unless you ask them. Should I save you the trouble? After all, it's only fair that you know something about them in exchange for Laura's information."

"Let's not go there. It would be a breach of trust to divulge anything." She turned back to the Spartans, a troubled look on her face.

"Laura trusts me implicitly, and has ever since I forced her to tell me who and what she was. I will not break that trust and risk putting her into harm's way or losing her friendship. I can't help you, but I'll give you some advice: Stay away from her. She's been getting suspicious ever since Colonel Ackerson came back to Earth, there's bad blood there. You don't want to be on her bad side."

Taking their cue, the Spartans left.

****October 3, 2552 1045 hours****

****Training Facility****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

The four Spartans were observing another of Laura's workouts when they noticed about fifty ODSs gathering around the arena. Several of them were muttering to each other, and all of them were watching her with overt hostility.

"This could get ugly," Linda said, motioning to the various Helljumpers.

"Let's see how she does first." Fred was still skeptical, and still upset by having had Laura best him in close combat.

Meanwhile, Laura seemed totally oblivious to the trouble gathering around her, until she finished her workout; as she was packing up her equipment, she heard someone spit out her codename like a swearword.

"Blade!" Laura turned around, pasting a smile on her face: the Spartans could tell it wasn't real or friendly.

"I hope you're all here for a pleasant little chat, but maybe it's a little too warm in here for that kind of thing." The seemingly nonchalant tone in her voice only served to irritate them.

"You're good at taking out unarmed men one at a time. Let's see how well you do against all of us." The Helljumpers nodded their assent, looking like sharks among a school of fat fish.

"I certainly wouldn't dream of taking on all of you at once, that would be way too easy. Why don't you just go home and rest?"

That remark was more than the Helljumpers could take. As one, they stormed into the arena, intent on killing her right there. She easily dodged several of them, incapacitating several more with quick martial-arts attacks. A number of them lost heart and ran, but Laura still had forty more to deal with.

"And you call yourselves soldiers? My niece and nephew could do better." She laughed, a harsh sound which only made them angrier.

The Spartans watched in amazement as she continued to laugh at them. "She seems to be enjoying herself, a bit too much," Will muttered.

"No, she's not. She doesn't like this at all." The new voice belonged to a young woman who had come up behind them. Nicole Mitchell watched Laura dodge and laugh in the arena, shaking her head.

"That's not real laughter. It's just another weapon in her arsenal. She explained it to me once: If your enemy gets angry, he'll make mistakes that could give you the upper hand. She's goading them into making mistakes."

"How can you tell, Miss Mitchell?"

"I've heard her real laughter. It's so much different from this; it has more music to it. Lorienna's laughter is the same way. If you ever hear her when she's happy, you'll understand; until then, believe me when I say that her laughter is empty of anything right now. It's just another weapon." With that, she turned and walked away, leaving the Spartans with a lot more to think about.

Meanwhile, Laura had whittled her opposition down to about thirty-five, and the Helljumpers were clearly losing patience. They began to attack a few at a time, and some of them snuck around behind her and grabbed her by the throat; Laura flipped backwards, causing them to lose their grips, and sprinted to a new location in the arena. One of her opponents grabbed a M6D pistol and aimed at her—Laura dove for her blades and drew them, expecting the worst. The soldier fired a full clip at her face, but everyone was surprised by what happened next: bringing her knives to bear, Laura deflected the rounds into the dirt, the walls, and the arena barriers, using her training with the bladed disks to great effect.

If the Helljumpers hadn't been pissed before, they were now. Laura found herself in a bit of difficulty: their anger gave them new energy, and she was backed into a corner and tiring rapidly. _As easy as it would be to kill them, and as justified as it would be, I can't. We need every man and more for this war._ No sooner did she think this than thirty-five pissed off ODSTs converged on her position. Laura slipped into jujitsu, but there were too many of them. Concentrating on survival, she almost didn't notice when the Spartans decided to lend a hand. _What the hell are they doing?_ As grateful as she was for the assistance, she was still a bit worried, not surprising considering ONI seemed determined to destroy her of late. When everything was over (five minutes later), she shot all four of them a steely glare, not letting her fears or her gratitude show.

"What the hell were you thinking? Now you've made yourselves targets."

"We figured you could use a hand," the quiet guy answered. She mentally reviewed files and came up with a name—"Will, SPARTAN-043.

"You wasted your time. I can take care of myself, just as well as she can." Laura gestured to the red-haired woman (Linda, SPARTAN-058).

"Fine, then next time we won't even bother," Fred snapped.

"Good. And while you're at it, stay far away from me, unless you want to see what happens when I really get pissed." With that parting shot, Laura stalked off to the showers. Nicole, who had stopped at the edge of the gym, watched her friend stomp away and shook her blonde head sadly.

The Spartans noticed Nicole standing there and approached warily. Nicole saw them coming and made no move to turn away. _If they'd wanted her dead they would have let the Helljumpers kill her. They deserve a bit of an explanation, but I'll have to be careful not to

say too much._

"It's a bit nerve-racking, I know. She's not used to letting her other side out."

"What other side? She didn't seem too pleased that we saved her ass in there," Fred fumed quietly, finally getting his temper under control; the entire situation had rattled him.

"It's not that simple. She was grateful, but she's also got a lot of pride. It takes a lot for her to admit she needs help, no matter what the area. She's also worried about this whole ONI thing, if not downright scared. That bitter, angry exterior is just a front, one she uses whenever she thinks ONI is around; underneath it all she's kind, strong, and sad."

"How can you tell?" Linda asked--Nicole had done a bit of hacking with Lориenna after they'd left, and knew all their names.

"I've known Laura for years, and I can read her like a book as a result. No matter how she tries, she can't hide anything from me. It doesn't help that she's been forced to be alone for so long that she's become self-reliant. Only a few people are allowed to get close to her: her family, General West, my brother Nathan, and me."

"How did she even allow you to get close, if she's as much of a loner as you say?" the one named John asked.

"It's a long story, too long for now. A few years after I'd met her, which wasn't as hard as you might think, I caught her practicing in her mom's backyard. That's when I confronted her: she was so tired of having no one besides her family to turn to that she told me everything, and does to this day. The funny thing is, in the beginning she came to me and befriended me, not exactly what you'd expect from a loner." Nicole stopped, and her face showed an internal struggle as she tried to think of what to tell them next.

"She's been under a lot of stress since Ackerson came back to Earth, and since he's decided she's no longer fit for combat duty." The way she said this sent a chill up the Spartans' spines. "It doesn't help that he's concocted rumors of her being a traitor, either. Why do you think those ODS Ts were so eager to kill her? It wasn't because she insulted them with her nonchalance. If she even showed one moment of weakness, Ackerson would jump all over it."

"Why are you even telling us all this? Yesterday you said if you told us anything you'd be betraying your friend," John pointed out quietly.

"If you were going to kill her, you wouldn't have tried to help her earlier. As far as betrayals go, I think she needs your help more than she even knows herself—it would be an even greater betrayal to keep my mouth shut and do nothing. I won't tell you her deepest secrets, but I'll do what I can to help you connect with her. Once you get her to trust you, you'll have a staunch ally, one who would do anything for you: the hardest part is getting her to trust you." She glanced at her watch. "I'm sorry, but I need to get going. I'll try and find a way to tell you more if I can."

After she left, the Spartans remembered General West saying something

similar to one of Nicole Mitchell's comments: _'Once you earn her trust you've got a real ally; the hard part is convincing her to trust you.'_ Clearly there was more to Laura than she let on, and West knew it. John motioned to his fellow Spartans.

"Keep your ears open. There's something ONI doesn't want us knowing."

"Then why even bother?" Fred asked. "If ONI doesn't want us to know something, why poke into what's not our business?"

"Because she's a Spartan." Surprisingly, the voice came from Linda. "She's one of us, and she's in a war zone of ONI's making. Did you even listen to what Nicole Mitchell told us? Or are you still pissed because she was too scared to admit she needed our help?"

"Enough," John muttered angrily. "Arguing isn't going to do any good. Just stay alert. We don't know what ONI's plans are, but if today was any indication, it's not going to be good." Just as he finished saying this, Cortana tapped into his neural net.

"Chief, we may have a problem. I've gotten into Blade's CSV, and there's something here I think you should see."

Laura stood in the shower, letting the hot water pelt her face as she seethed inwardly. The nerve of those Spartans to assume she needed their assistance! _Well, you did_, she reminded herself. Still, it rankled no end to think that they'd seen her helpless, or as close to helpless as she ever got. Angrily, she turned off the water and grabbed a towel, drying herself off vigorously as if she were taking her anger out on a few droplets of moisture. Poking her head out, and seeing no one else in the locker room, she slipped out and pulled on a clean set of clothes before heading back to her bunk. It was still too early in the morning for her to hole up, but she really didn't feel like facing off with anyone else today.

"Cortana, you're kidding, right?" John asked quietly as he and his friends stared at the screen.

"I only wish I was. Ackerson and his pawns have all but signed her death warrant. If she's not careful, one of these days someone will succeed in killing her."

"That explains the paranoia," Will mused quietly.

"It explains a lot of things, but I don't think she'll go down quite that easily," John replied. _There's got to be a way to help her_, he thought; after all, she was a Spartan and he never left a fellow Spartan in danger if he could avoid it. _There's always a way._

7. Chapter 6: Old Combat Styles, Older Brot

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Six: Old Combat Styles, Older Brother Returns

October 5, 2552 1037 hours

****Training Facility****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

The Spartans had been called into the observation room that overlooked the arena by General West, who motioned them over to the windows.

"Something interesting I thought you might like to see. Remember I was telling you about the other martial arts Laura studied?" When they nodded (a dark look on Fred's face in the process), West continued, "I noticed she was bringing in a different set of sheaths, so I figured you'd want to see what else she uses in her workouts."

They watched as Laura put a bundle down carefully on the ground, and unwrapped it to expose four sheathed knives; the handles that stuck out of them were strange—two sharp, curved points on the outside, while the handle itself jutted out to the wrist, and the blade itself reached as long as a human forearm. Two of the strange knives had silver handles set with winking pale-blue gemstones, while the other two seemed to be plain steel. She pulled the plain ones out of their sheaths and began to clean the blades, a faraway look on her face which cleared instantly as Nicole approached from behind.

"Working with the _sais_ today?" Laura nodded as she idly twirled one knife in her hand. The Spartans marveled at the intricate curves made by the blade as it cut the air in glittering arcs. Laura switched directions, moving the spinning blade almost effortlessly.

"My dexterity counts have been falling lower than they should of late," she said, although her twirling gave no hint of falling dexterity, "so I figured on bringing it back up. Care to watch?"

Nicole nodded as her friend sheathed her knives, strapped the sheaths to her waist, and entered the arena. Music started to play, but it wasn't the usual music: while it was still fast, there was more of a lilting feel to it. Laura drew the knives quicker than the eye could see, and began twirling them around her wrists. She began to whirl, leap, and kick, all in time with the music. Fred recognized some of the moves as the ones she'd used on him their first day on Earth. Her movements had more grace here than in her usual workouts: they actually looked more like an intricate dance than a form of combat. Controlling the knives was obviously a lot of work, but she handled it as if she had done it for years—as far as they knew, she probably had. Spinning the blades toward her, she thrust behind her—if someone had been standing there they would have been killed. A quick slash brought the blades back to the front, as she spun the points around again. Sprinting forwards, she jumped up on the railing around the arena and pushed off, executing a clean flip and stabbing behind her as she landed. Laura continued to whirl in a graceful dance of death, a dance which seemed to mirror the music in speed, intensity and beauty. The Spartans, watching her move, were impressed; even Fred was surprised and impressed by the grace and intricacies of the martial art.

As the music ended, they finally noticed a middle-aged Navy officer

watching Laura move, his left arm in a makeshift sling. His dark hair was such a dark brown that it looked almost black, and most of it was thinning out. He was tall and extremely thin, but his eyes were dark. The Spartans noticed a shadowy resemblance to Laura in the dark hair, dark eyes, and intense face, although his face had a slight smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

"Think fast!" the man called as he threw a knife at the back of Laura's head. She whirled around and caught it between her blades, a fierce look in her eyes. When she saw the visitor, however, the anger gave way to surprise and delight.

"Phil!" She dropped her knives, vaulted over the barrier around the edge of the arena, and pulled him into a rough hug, letting go the minute she saw him grimace. "When did you get back? We've been so worried!"

"My ship and I just made it back in yesterday. I heard a few whispers that said you were still alive, so I came to check on you. Have you killed anyone yet?"

"Oh, don't be such a tease." She began stowing her odd weapons, the shadow of a smile lingering on her face. "Now that you're back, I can fill you in on the latest batch of scandal, mayhem, and of course insights on the Terrible Tickling Twins. We're almost together again." Her mouth shut and clamped down into a thin line as she finished packing up her gear.

"I see you still have the _sais_ Dad gave you for Christmas," the man commented.

"Yes, and I don't intend to use them until he returns. If he doesn't, I'll never use them again."

"He bought them for you to use, not for you to worship. He'd want you to use them. Besides, you should use them because you're just like those _sais_: beautiful, fast, graceful, and deadly."

"Graceful, fast, and deadly I can handle, but I doubt I'm that beautiful."

"Ok, fine, don't trust my judgment. But seriously, you should use those more often. Dad would want it."

"We'll argue about that later," she said, and sent a pointed glance at his arm. "What happened to you?"

"Broke my arm putting out fires on the bridge: a cross-bracing slammed into it."

"And you haven't got it treated yet? What on Earth were you thinking? Come on, let's get that looked at."

"What about your workout?" The serious tone of voice indicated that the man clearly didn't want her to waste time; either that, or he was teasing her.

"Fear not. There will be others," she intoned dramatically. "Now come on, or I'll carry you over there. Besides, it'll give you a chance to say hi to Mom. She's been so worried about you lately."

"You couldn't drag me anywhere, Laura."

"Oh no? As skinny as you are I couldn't drag you anywhere? Should I put it to the test?"

"Don't you dare," he said, trying to sound stern. Unfortunately, he broke out into a big grin, one that proved to be infectious as Laura grinned back. Draping one arm over his shoulders, she sighed contentedly; it was the first emotion besides anger that the Spartans had seen from her yet.

"Damn, it's good to see you back again."

"Yes, I'm sure," the man smiled as they moved towards the exit. "Now I can keep an eye on my little sister, keep her out of trouble."

"I can take care of myself, Phillip Joseph Morisson!"

As the two walked out of the workout room still verbally jabbing each other, Nicole trailing behind them with a smile on her face, Will looked over at the general.

"That was her brother, wasn't it? I thought we weren't allowed to return to our families."

"Laura's situation was different from yours, son. In a sense, she's the reason for everything that happened to you. Yes, that was her older brother, Commander Phillip Morisson. He's actually six years older than she is, and a fine Naval officer." There was genuine praise in West's voice.

"What kind of combat knives were those, sir?" Fred asked, wondering how soon he could get a pair of his own.

"I asked Laura once. She said they were called '_sais_', and that they were used in Oriental martial arts, specifically Japanese. The plain ones she purchased herself, and paid a lot of money for themâ€"they're really hard to find."

"And the fancy ones?" Will asked.

"Her father gave them to her as a Christmas present when she was sixteen; judging by the workmanship, they must have cost him a small fortune. Those blue stones are her birthstone, blue zircons I think. She doesn't use them nearly as often because they're so fancyâ€"she's probably afraid she'll break them." He chuckled at the ridiculousness of it. "She purposely went out and bought plain _sais_ to protect her father's present. Usually wears the nice ones on special occasions, and I must say they look quite nice with her dress uniform."

"Why the different martial arts?" The Master Chief asked.

"Keeps her on her toes, makes for a good workout, I don't know," the general said, and shrugged. "You'd have to ask her."

****Adams Medical Facility 1052 hours****

****Camp Hayes****

Dr. Gedeon was sitting at her desk, writing out recommendations on quarantine procedures: HighCom in Sydney was in the middle of a nasty flu epidemic. _Good thing it's a slow day today, or I wouldn't have time to do this_, she mused. A knock on the door prompted her to say "Come in," without even looking up.

"Hi Mom," a low voice muttered, sending her head up in surprise. Her oldest child stood in front of her, arm crudely bandaged.

"Phillip! When did you get back?" the elderly doctor was up and out of her seat as quickly as she could manage it. She hugged the man briefly, stepped back, and examined his bandaged arm.

"Not too long ago. Someone came close to dragging me over here almost as soon as she was finished exercising."

"Oh, Laura, Laura, Laura," Dr. Gedeon smiled as she shook her head. "She's definitely stubborn sometimes. She's also been a bit worried lately, but that's neither here nor there." She motioned her son to follow her as she moved to tend his arm. "Whoever looked at this did a decent job, but it needs a proper cast. Hold still."

"I told him he should have gotten that looked at first thing, instead of coming to see me work out," a lilting voice supplied from one corner of the room.

"He'll be fine, and truth be told he probably could have waited a few hours before he absolutely had to come in," her mother replied.

"Mom, you're not helping," Laura groused, poking at the dried plaster bandages.

Dr. Gedeon ignored her daughter's complaints, since she knew they weren't really complaints at all. Instead, they were her attempt at dry humor, which still wasn't working. The doctor finished bandaging her son's arm and gave him a better sling.

"You're lucky, the break's healing nicely already. Give it about three months and you should be back in top shape." She looked at her son. "You have someplace to stay?"

"Not really, no," Phil replied, a small smile forming on his face. "I didn't get the chance to apply for temporary quarters before I got pulled over here."

"Hey, if I'd pulled you, you'd have a lot more than just one broken arm," Laura pointed out.

Dr. Gedeon smiled at the banter between her children. "You know the house is still open if you want it."

"You know, I may just do that," Phil smiled. He looked at his younger sister. "Think there's any chance of you getting some leave?"

"As a matter of fact, I think I'm about due," Laura grinned. "I'll talk to General West." _He'll manage it, he usually does,_ Laura thought, then smiled at the irony. _The only real military friend I have is my CO. Go figure._

8. Chapter 7: Reach Memories I

Sorry again about the length on this one: it's kind of a flashback chapter. Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Seven: Reach Memories Part 1

****October 7, 2552 0845 hours****

****Gedeon Residence****

****North America****

Laura had managed to wrangle a few days' leave out of ONI and the UNSC, with General West's help. She went to stay at her mother's house, where she'd grown up when she wasn't on base. As she relaxed on a comfortable chair in her mother's living room, she thought back to her first trip off-planet, a trip that changed her life forever.

****April 14, 2523 0945 hours****

****UNSC shuttle _Arturius_, en route to Epsilon Eridani System****

Laura stared out the window at the strange darkness of the different, slightly creepy space—"Slipspace", she'd heard someone call it. ONI had actually allowed her mother to take her to Reach when she'd been asked to check on some of the soldiers there. She wondered what was going on when her mom came into the small cabin.

"Nervous, Princess?" Laura smiled at the nickname. _Princess,_ she thought. _I am a warrior princess._

"No, Mom. Just a little excited. I hope there are kids my age there."

"Don't worry, I'm sure there'll be someone there you can talk to."

As Laura turned to look out the window, she saw the space was changing; in a few seconds it turned back to normal. _We're almost there,_ she thought with sudden glee. _My first big adventure._

When they landed, Laura saw her mom whisked away by people in lab coats; not surprising, given the circumstances. According to her mom, there was an outbreak of some type of flu on the base at Reach, one where they needed her assistance in identification, treatment, and potential quarantine. As soon as she stepped off the ramp, Laura noticed a woman in plain, business-type clothes approach.

"Are you Laura?" When she nodded, the woman smiled warmly. "I'm Dr. Halsey."

"I've heard of you, Dr. Halsey. Every time Mom and Dad's superiors come by, they whisper your name when they think I can't hear. I have good ears, better than they'd think." She grinned mischievously.

"I'm sure you do. Would you like me to show you where you're going to be staying for your visit?"

"I thought I'd be staying with my mom." Her dark eyes narrowed, reminding Dr. Halsey of a suspicious officer given an easy assignment after several difficult ones.

"Wouldn't you rather stay with someone your age?"

"Their parents probably wouldn't like it too much. Besides, I'd rather spend as much time with my mom as I can; sometimes we both get so busy we can't see each other." Dr. Halsey smiled at the cryptic response, especially coming from this particular twelve-year-old.

"Very well, Laura. I'll take you to the quarters we've set up for you and your mom."

Laura noticed a slight movement at the corner of her eye, but gave no sign that anything was unusual; it wouldn't do to spook the spook. She obediently followed Dr. Halsey down the road and to their quarters. On the way, they passed a group of young soldiers drilling on the parade ground. _Odd,_ she thought,_ for a minute they looked like they were only 12, like me, but now they look almost 20._

****April 17, 2523 1030 hours****

****UNSC Military Complex, Reach****

****Epsilon Eridani System****

Over the next few days, Laura was escorted around the base by what seemed a standard noncom, except for his bearing. _This guy screams covert ops, so why is he babysitting me? I can take care of myself._ Eventually, they took her to what they called a 'playground': an obstacle course of ropes, bridges, poles, and handholds. She'd overheard radio chatter about 'setting up the most difficult layout for the course' and grinned at what she saw. _Is this the best they can do? I'm insulted._ Still, she acted like a naïve pre-teenage child.

"Can I go on that? It looks like fun."

"We'll be timing you to see how fast you can run it first, then maybe you can play," the 'noncom' answered. She caught a hint of disgust in his tone: clearly, he thought she was extremely stupid. _No time for that now,_ she thought as she got ready.

"GO!"

For a twelve-year-old, Laura was fast: in a matter of seconds she'd grabbed the nearest rope and pulled herself to the top before she realized it didn't lead to the bridge she needed to cross--it was a dead end. _Improvise, adapt, survive,_ she remembered her father telling her over and over, and she did. Bracing her feet, she swung out from the wall the rope was attached to, let go of the rope, and flipped end over end to the bridge, effectively chopping time off her course. She ran nimbly over and reached a series of hand-holds spaced

out on a wooden framework, which she swung easily across. Climbing up one last pole, she rang the bell at the top of it and slid down silently, sprinting easily across the course back to her escort.

"Does my time meet with ONI's approval?" she asked, her question and knowing look sending the officer into a state of extreme astonishment. _How in the hell did she know?_

"One minute thirty seconds. A new record I think."

"And I think you're nuts: my personal best was 45 seconds. Of course, I knew the backdrop like the back of my hand and could compensate for surprises. Here I'm out of my element." Looking beyond the ONI spook, while still giving the impression that she was looking at him, she noticed motion in the trees behind him: her sharp eyes confirmed the soldiers watching her were her age exactly, and some of them she recognized from passing them on the parade ground.

"Would you prefer to run it again?"

"No, I think I'll take a hike instead. Those woods look like fun," she replied, a slight smirk on her face as she walked off toward the woods, heading in the opposite direction of the kids she'd seen.

Entering the woods behind the base, Laura listened, getting a feel for her environment. She felt dwarfed by the trees around her, even though some of them had branches reaching down to her level. She began to walk deeper in the forest, eyes roving this way and that as if she were looking for something. In fact, she was looking for pinecones for Nana, souvenirs from her first adventure. Stopping under a tall pine, Laura bent down and scanned the ground under it; a noise at her back alerted her to company, and she gave a start to maintain the illusion of ignorance.

The girl facing her was about her age, but her build and keen eyes made her look much older; her brown hair was close-cropped like a Marine's, she had a pistol strapped to her waist, and she wore standard military training coveralls.

"Did you lose something?"

"Actually, I was looking for pinecones for my grandma," Laura replied, still trying to give off an air of innocence, even though she doubted it was working. "She hasn't been feeling well lately, and I thought they would cheer her up. She's always had a thing for pinecones, ever since I could remember; my brother and I used to go on walks and bring some back for her to add to her collection."

"It's not safe for people to wander off alone here, especially civilians. There are wolves in the woods, among other things."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you were concerned. It's not like military people to get concerned over civilians." She lowered her voice and muttered, "Even though I'm not one." A loud crashing in the underbrush caused both girls to tense. Laura reacted faster than the other girl thought possible for an untrained civilian, swinging the girl behind a tree.

"Probably ONI. Stay put until I get rid of them," she hissed furiously, her demeanor changing quickly from innocence to intensity as she slipped further away. The other girl didn't even get the chance to argue, as four burly Marines tore through. Laura looked up at them with a slightly worried look on her face.

"I think I got a bit lost. Can you show me the way back?" Something about the troopers' faces told her this wasn't what they were expecting. She waited.

"What do we do? Could be a trick," one muttered; Laura's sharp ears heard everything.

"No way any of these freaks could get lost here," the leader snapped. "Grab her." Two Marines came up and gripped her arms, a third patted her down.

"She's unarmed, sir. She doesn't have the flag either." The leader wasn't happy with the report.

"Where are your buddies, and where's our flag?" he growled. Laura was worried. _What the hell is going on?_

"I don't know what you're talking about. Mom and I just got here a few days ago, and I just came looking for pinecones for my grandma." She knew she was in a bad spot, especially when one of the Marines raised a hand to hit her. Just as she prepared to try and escape, a hail of darts came flying through the trees. Each one was well-aimed: her captors went down at once. _Tranquilizer darts,_ she realized, _but from who?_ The answer came as three figures came out of the underbrush where they'd been hiding and two more dropped out of a nearby tree, four boys and one girl: they were enough like the girl she'd shoved behind the tree that they could have been family, except for their hair, eyes, and skin. _How did I not notice them there?_ The girl and one of the boys were both holding sniper rifles, and seemed to know exactly how to use them. The brown-haired girl she'd 'saved' moved into the open, pistol in hand, and all six of them stared at Laura with amazement. Laura stared at them in horror, as a wave of sick realization broke over her. _They lied! ONI lied to me, and I almost got killed for it!_

"Are you okay?" The girl she'd 'saved' was asking her if she was hurt, but Laura didn't hear the words. She broke away from the group and ran deeper into the woods, hoping that no one would ever find her, wishing to die.

Laura kept on running until she finally tripped over a tree root. Sprawled on her face, she lay there sobbing; why had they lied to her? How much did her parents know? Could she go back and face them, knowing what she did? Was that why ONI had allowed her to come here with her mom? What would happen next? The questions tore through her mind, causing more tears and more confusion. A soft footfall near her head caused her to turn in surprise. It was the brown-haired girl. Laura had had no idea she had been followed, and guessed the noises were purposely made so as not to startle her overly much.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll survive, I only tripped." Laura stood up slowly, positioning

herself with her back to the tree, still scared and suspicious. Fortunately, the sudden appearance of the mysterious girl was enough to stop her tears, and she roughly wiped the rest away. The girl spread her hands out, showing she was unarmed; Laura didn't move.

"You're one of us, aren't you?" the girl asked.

"Can't be. I'm from Earth. Mom came up to check some base personnel for some kind of flu outbreak, and ONI said she could bring me along. I was told there would be kids on base I could hang around with, but they lied. You're not kids, you're assassins."

"We're Spartans," the girl replied. Laura shook her head.

"Why should I believe you? Whatever you and your friends were up to back there almost got me killed! Please, just leave me alone, and stay far away." Laura looked for an escape route, but something in the girl's next words stopped her from moving.

"If you're not one of us, how do you know about ONI?"

"Isn't it enough that I do know?" Laura locked eyes with the strange girl. "I'm not one of you, and nothing will ever change that. I'll always be alone, even among my family."

"You have a family?"

"Don't you? They tried to take them away from me years ago, but I didn't let them. With everything they're teaching me, they can at least let me have my family."

"We were told we could never go home," the girl said baldly. Laura's stomach clenched coldly. What the hell is she saying? And how can she tell I'm a Spartan? And what does she mean when she says 'We're Spartans'? They told me I'm the only one!

The teakettle went off, jerking Laura away from the memories. Going into the kitchen, she poured the hot water into a teapot and steeped a teabag in it; the smell of chamomile filled the room--a soothingly pleasant smell, much like the woods behind Camp Hayes. I wonder if there's chamomile there, she mused as she poured tea into a ceramic mug. Sipping the hot tea, she recalled her next meeting with the strange young girl, the Spartan called Kelly.

****April 18, 2552 2300 hours****

****UNSC Military Complex, Reach****

****Epsilon Eridani System****

She'd slipped out of the base as soon as darkness fell, heading back toward the woods. It had been almost too easy to get by the guards on the perimeter, but then again, she'd been trained for stealth, and when she put her mind to it she could be extremely sneaky. I am smoke upon the wind, she recited mentally as she slipped through. Creeping into the woods, Laura checked to make sure she was alone before going further in. The air was cool but comfortable, and Laura's hiking clothes (which she'd slipped into silently before she left) were more than enough protection. Stopping at a stream to get

her bearings, she thought she heard movement nearby. Laura knew it couldn't be anybody from on base, since she'd left no trace when she'd slipped out, but was determined to take no chances on it being the same Marines who'd attacked her before. She turned her back to the tree and waited. As she'd feared, it was them: they seemed too glad to see her, and were clearly bent on revenge.

"Well, now, where's the rest of your freak pack?"

"I don't have a 'pack', as you so crudely put it," Laura replied coolly. "As I told you yesterday, Mom and I only arrived a few days ago, something about a flu outbreak on base. I just went looking for pinecones for my grandma when you attacked me without provocation."

"And how did you escape, Little Miss Prissy? When we got shot up with narq-darts by your freak friends."

"That was just bad timing on your part, since I have no friends here or on Earth. That's the truth, take it or leave it." Her dark eyes swept the area around her, in case she needed to make a break for it. She spotted two branches on the ground near her. _If I can get to them, I may have a chance if things get ugly._ And things got ugly, because one of the Marines landed a fist in her gut. She doubled over, gasping more to try and catch them off guard than out of real pain, even though it hurt like hell.

At that moment, a rock came through the trees and nailed one of her attackers in the head; when they turned, Laura dove for the branches, and had them up and ready when they turned back.

"I don't know who the hell threw that, but it seems I owe them a favor. I'm no cold-blooded attacker, but you threw the first punch."

"And what are you going to do, beat us into submission with sticks?" the leader laughed incredulously.

"Only if you force me to. I'd rather not have to do that," she replied.

The lead Marine charged, only to have Laura slip aside quickly and bring her branches into his head and ribs--hard. He doubled over in pain, even though all Laura could have done was bruise him a little. Sliding into a jujitsu stance, she twirled the branches to a new position, and watched as the other Marines grabbed their buddy and bolted. Hearing movement behind her, she turned to see her acquaintance from the previous day.

"I guess I owe you one, for throwing that rock. How did you even find me?"

"We were playing capture the flag with those assholes yesterday, which was when you got caught in the crossfire. Today we were hiding out, just because we could."

"How'd you find me, though? And why expose yourself to save my hide? No one else would have."

"I followed you once you got in the woods, and figured you could use

the assist. Besides, you're the same as we are, that much is clear, even if you're from Earth." Laura shook her head, her dark hair falling in front of her eyes.

"No, I'm nothing like you. You know when to fight back, and when to attack. I just defend." She turned and tossed the branches aside, preparing to leave. "I should go, before Mom wakes up and notices I'm gone."

"You snuck out of the base?"

"Pretty much, yeah. I wanted to see the woods in the night, but I think I've seen enough to last me for a while."

Laura turned to head out of the woods, but stopped when the girl asked, "What's your name?"

"Laura."

She broke into a smooth sprint, taking the broken terrain with almost no difficulty: it was like being at home on a cross-country hike, and the familiarity brought a smile to her face. When she approached the base perimeter, she slowed and clambered up a tree, a tree whose branches hung over the fence surrounding the base. Swinging across, she dropped noiselessly and slipped in through the guards. Finding the window of the quarters she and her mother shared, Laura slipped in and quickly changed out of her hiking clothes and into her pajamas.

When she woke up the next morning, her mom had already left, and there was a small bag sitting next to her head. Inside were about ten different pinecones and a small note: _From Kelly_. Laura smiled, realizing she must have been followed once again, and that nothing else had happened to her.

Shortly after she got dressed, the door opened and Dr. Halsey entered the room, followed by a strongly built man in military uniform, and the Marines that had attacked her in the night. Laura took one look and decided to try and run. _Definitely not the best place to be right now_, she thought as she started backing toward the window.

"Well, Laura, you've certainly put these Marines in a very bad mood." Dr. Halsey's tone was even, but Laura didn't trust it one bit. _She has to know where I was last night._ Laura decided that since the good doctor was obviously in the know, it was safest to tell the truth.

"They had it coming, attacking me without provocation. Besides, why should _I_ care how they feel, when no one here has even given a thought to my feelings? Since I came here I've only had one person besides my mom tell me the truth: everyone else has been lying to me from Day One, and I've had enough!" She was angry, and she had every right to be angry, but they just stared at her.

"You say they attacked you first?" the man in uniform asked.

"Yes, twice. Once two days ago, and once last night. Both times I had done nothing to warrant such treatment, and both times I tried to tell the truth and was rebuffed. Now, could someone please explain to

me why this kind of behavior is allowed, especially when directed at visitors?" The adults were still not listening to her, it seemed, and Laura was getting fed up with the whole charade. Suddenly, Dr. Halsey noticed the bag of pinecones on the floor next to Laura's sleeping bag.

"Where did these come from?" she asked, picking them up and noticing the note.

"Why do you ask?" Laura countered, snatching the bag back, spilling some of the pinecones on the floor in the process.

"Just curious. I imagine these took you a while to collect."

"It didn't help that these guys decided to use me as a punching bag while I was collecting them last night in the woods," Laura snapped. She was still suspicious, and decided to protect the girl who'd saved her bacon last night, the girl called Kelly, by leaving her out of the conversation. Fortunately, she was saved from further questions by her mother walking through the door.

"What is going on here?" Laura took advantage of the opportunity and slipped out the door, stealthily making her way to the edge of the base. She saw movement at the obstacle course (the 'playground') and stopped to watch. The kids she'd met in the woods, as well as several others like them, were running the course in teams of threeâ€"twenty-five teams in all. When they'd finished, they gathered in a group around the bell. Kelly looked up, nudged the two boys beside her, and the red-haired girl nearby, and they saw her. Laura held their eyes for a long moment, and slipped away into the woods. _I hope we'll be going home soon,_ she thought. _I don't like it here anymore. This isn't an adventure, it's a test._

****October 7, 2552 0910 hours****

****Gedeon Residence****

****North America****

Laura put down her tea, frowning at what happened after. After she and her mother had returned from Reach, Laura had made her first serious foray into ONI's records. It wasn't exactly a milk run, but it wasn't difficult either, and she had learned that she wasn't the only Spartan as they'd told her for so long. At the time, the scope of what ONI had done was unclear, but that tiny bit of knowledge had sparked the hatred and bitter betrayals that pursued her even today. As her snooping got more advanced, and she got older, she'd learned the truth: everything that they'd done to her was done to the Spartans on Reach as well. They'd taken her at four, which proved to be too young, so the next candidates were taken at six. They'd allowed her to visit her family, which hampered her training, so they'd kidnapped the children and replaced them with poorly made clones. She'd nearly died during the augmentation, but since she'd survived, they'd done it to the others (thinking their 'better' training would improve their odds of survival), and thirty had died in the process, while twelve others were permanently disabled. _I had been nothing but a human guinea pig! Now that I'm no longer useful, they're trying to destroy me and hide my existence._ She was certain of it, and even more certain that none of the other Spartans remembered her brief visit at all. ONI she could handle, but the

other Spartansâ€|well, it hurt that they had forgotten her. _No time for that now, though,_ she thought. _I need to start thinking about capturing a ship. In order to do that, I need to clear my head._ Setting down her now empty mug, she went to the hall closet for a light jacket.

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes 0910 hours****

Back at Camp Hayes, meanwhile, West's words about the other Spartan being on Reach came to mind as the four surviving Spartans recalled a young girl they'd accidentally saved from Tango Company when she'd wandered into the woods. Remembering her face, and the look of horror on it, they noticed at last a strange resemblance to the mysterious Spartan General West and Colonel Ackerson had called Blade. John suddenly had a flashback to a photo album the Spartans had examined before their physical: a picture of a young woman in blue lounging against a tree trunk. He turned to the others.

"Remember that photo album of Dr. Gedeon's?"

"Yeah, what of it?" Fred replied.

"Remember that picture of the civilian, the one in blue? I think that was Blade."

Will thought about it. "There's almost an exact resemblance. But that woman was a civilian."

"Maybe not," Linda broke in thoughtfully. "The family shot had her in a dress uniform, and remember the insignia? Two crossed knives."

"Blade? Blade is related to Dr. Gedeon? It's still hard to believe," Fred countered.

"General West said she was related to her, and to Colonel Morisson, remember?" John pointed out. "Now that we've seen the resemblance, and now that we know she was on Reach, we can't just dismiss her as unimportant."

"One thing, though: if Blade really was the civilian in the picture, then why did it take so long for us to recognize her?" Will asked.

"Apparently, wearing civilian clothes and letting her hair down makes a big impact on her appearance," John mused. "Every time we've seen her she's been in a workout suit with her hair pulled back, and she's never been in the best of moods. In those pictures she was either calm or happy, which we've never really seen either."

"Amazing how little things can make a big difference," Linda commented.

"Where is she, anyway? I don't like it when she's not visible," Fred muttered, still upset with the whole martial-arts fiasco. He was one of the few Spartans who could even come close to holding a grudge.

"West got her some time off; she and Dr. Gedeon left this afternoon," Will replied.

None of the others needed to say a word, a look was all they needed. As one, they stood up and moved out, heading in the general direction of Dr. Gedeon's home.

9. Chapter 8: Spartan Rematch

Ok, this is basically the Spartan's payback for Fred getting beaten the first time. Hopefully no one has any problems with the 'oldies' mentioned: if there's a problem I'll take 'em out. Enjoy! Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Eight: Spartan Rematch

****October 7, 2552 0915 hours****

****Gedeon Residence****

****North America****

Laura pulled on a light jacket, gathered up a decently sized bag and headed out on a hike; she had plans for this crisp, cool autumn day, plus she felt a strong need to clear her head. As she hiked through the wooded areas, listening to the normal sounds of the country, she felt at peace as she seldom did. _I could be happy here, if it were allowed. This is bliss, walking here in the woods._ Once she arrived at her destination, she dropped the bag; it made an audible clinking noise.

The Spartans, curious about this new soldier, had followed her when she went home on leave, and were following her now. Blade seemed completely unaware of their presence, and she hiked on, occasionally whistling birdcalls to the trees. She stopped when she came to a decently sized clearing, and dropped the bag she was carrying, unperturbed by the noise it made. As she bent down and started opening the bag, the four Spartans saw its contents: a plain pair of _sais_, a pair of combat knives, her little box with the bladed disks, a pair of numchucks, and two small cylinders. She set these in a row and then pulled a smaller box from her pocket, clipped it to her belt, and pressed a button. Loud music blared from this smaller box: most of it was similar to Johnson's flip music, but not quite.

Laura started her workout with the numchucks, and some 'oldies' from around the year 2000 that she'd 'borrowed' from her brothers: as _Living in Chaos_ blared from her player, she twirled them expertly, dodging her own blows as she spun and kicked, and whirled almost as gracefully as a master. When she was done with that she moved to her _sais_, and her lilting nature music fit that excellently: she spun kicked, dropped and leaped, got a running start and flipped back, slashed expertly, and twirled the ornate blades around her wrists. Moving to her regular combat knives, she warmed up with _Front Line_ and moved on to her bladed disks and _Let the Bodies Hit the Floor_: a slightly creepy song when she stopped to think about it, but the speed and rhythm were perfect for this exercise. Finishing that one, she picked up the two cylinders and pressed a button on the center of each one; they elongated to full-length staves. _Bawitabaw_ came on for those: another weird song, but once again perfect for the workout

at hand. Had there been anyone nearby when she whirled those staves around her, she could easily have incapacitated them. As she finished her workout, she noticed movement in the underbrush.

"I see you, so you may as well come out," she called mirthlessly, whirling the staves around into a threatening position. Her momentary stab of anger gave way to fear, and her throat tightened when she saw one of the Spartans step out from the brush. _The Master Chief! I'm in trouble!_

The Master Chief had decided he would be the one to try Blade this time, for two reasons: first, he knew Fred was still mad about being beaten, and might kill Blade if he got the chance; second, he wanted to try her for himself, to see if he might not be able to take her down. _Knowing how she fights, that'll give me an advantage,_ he mused, staring at the woman in front of him.

"Care for a go?" he asked, pointing to one of the staves.

"You'll lose," Blade replied tossing him a staff. He hefted it, deciding on the best angles to use, and braced himself for her first strike. She came at him quickly, feinting left and striking right; he almost didn't counter in time. He managed to block her and dealt a savage blow that, had it hit, might have broken bone. She spun left and swiped at his legs, missing one but bringing the other down. When he landed on one knee, he shifted the staff and blocked a blow aimed at his chest; a swift twist sent her staff spinning away. She gripped his staff and tried to jerk it away; he held on.

Laura fought to gain control of the staff, since hers was gone; the Chief had a good grip on it. _Not bad, for a Spartan_, she thought. She still had a few tricks up her sleeve, though, and began to pull them out as she needed them. Planting one foot on the Chief's chest, she pushed backwards, wrenching the staff out of his grip and tossing it aside. He got up and assumed a fighting stance.

"You may as well give up," she panted. "You've all but lost."

"I haven't lost yet," her opponent growled. He charged forward suddenly, catching her off guard; she barely got out of the way and tried to land a blow on his neck. He gripped her wrist and yanked hard; she spun forward onto the ground, sprawling. Waiting for just the right moment, she spun one leg out and wiped him down on the ground as well. Before she could get up, however, the Chief gripped her and pinned her beneath him. She struggled a little, seemingly unable to escape; in reality she was checking the angles so she could break out at just the right moment.

John had her pinned, and she couldn't get loose. It would have been easy to knock her out and finish her right there, but something about this woman held him back. _What the hell is the matter with me?_ He looked down again at his opponent and noticed she'd stopped struggling. A cold look came into her dark eyes, a look he'd seen once before in a sniper's eyes just before an escape attempt. He didn't remember until later that she had been that same sniper.

"You're pinned, you've lost."

"I don't think so," she murmured calmly, coldly. A swift motion later

she hit his head with her own, knocking him backwards a bit and breaking lose. She darted up and assumed a fighting stance. "Never think you have a soldier beaten, especially a soldier who has nothing to lose. Those are the most dangerous." He noticed her dark eyes darting around, checking for more threats. "Where's the rest of your ilk? I know you never travel alone."

"They're nearby," he muttered, and saw Blade's eyes dart nervously back and forth. _She's worried_, he realized, _but why?_

Laura knew she only had a small amount of time before the rest of the Spartans came after her, and acted quickly. She wasn't going to cut and run in the middle of a perfectly good fight, but she sure as hell wasn't going to use an unfair advantage by picking up a weapon. Sprinting forward, she used her jujitsu skills to surprise the Master Chief, slipped behind him, and pressed on his carotid artery. As soon as he was unconscious, she caught him, checked his pulse to make sure he was still alive, and laid him down on the grass. Gathering up her equipment, she paused a moment and left him with one of her bladed disks.

"Might come in handy one day. You gave me a run for my money, almost killed me like Ackerson wants, but it ain't happening. Never give someone who has nothing to lose a reason to fight. Sleep well, by the time you wake up I'll be gone." With that, she tried to slip away, but the Chief was ready. He grabbed her ankle and yanked her backwards; she landed sprawling just in front of him, and he pulled one of her knives from its sheath. It had been easy for him to anticipate her trying that stunt and play unconscious, and it had given him the upper hand almost too easily. As it was, he had Blade right where he wanted her: on the ground with her own knife at her throat.

"Going somewhere? Everything was just getting started."

"I wouldn't count on it getting any better." Laura grabbed the hand that held her knife and twisted away. Wrenching the knife out of his grip and jumping to her feet, she realized if she didn't run she'd probably die; grabbing her bag, she bolted like the Covenant were after her. She knew these woods well; only a miracle would allow them to find her. Up ahead was a stand of trees close to the river, with branches drooping down to them. She gripped one, swung down, and submerged herself in the water. If her memory was correct, there was an overhang of rock a meter or so downstream, where no one would be able to see her surface; she headed for it, keeping herself submerged as long as she could, waiting for just the right moment to break free from the river current.

The other Spartans raced into the clearing after the mysterious Blade. Even though she was probably long gone, being both swift and on her own grounds, Fred sent Will off in pursuit while he and Linda eyed the Master Chief.

"Chief, you okay?" The Spartan nodded, staring into the woods.

"Why did she run? Spartans never abandon a fight."

"Who knows, but when she thought you were out of it, she had the weirdest look on her face. Almost looked like she regretted taking you out."

"What?" John had no idea, since his eyes had been closed to facilitate the ruse. _Why would she regret winning?_ He finally noticed the disk on the ground, where it had fallen out of his hand during their struggle. "She left this behind."

"Apparently she was impressed. She doesn't strike me as someone who would leave things behind lightly," Linda murmured. "She seems convinced that we're trying to kill her, though. Remember, after she thought she took you out, she said something about you almost killing her like Colonel Ackerson wanted."

"Well, this is making no sense. Another Spartan, an attempted assassination, conspiracies, and ONI in the thick of it! Anyone else having a hard time following this?" Fred was not happy with that whole line of thinking.

"We'll just have to wait and see," John muttered. He looked down at the disk in his hand, saw the skill it had taken to craft the device. _Why did she leave this behind?_

****Gedeon Residence 1145 hours****

Laura tried to slip in through the back door, hoping to dry off and get into some dry clothes before her mother returned. _If Mom sees me soaked like this, she'll have a fit._ As she dripped her way down the hall, she almost smacked headlong into her older brother, who was just exiting the kitchen.

"Dare I ask what happened?" he smirked, seeing his younger sister looking quite wet and bedraggled.

"Not until I get dried off, no. Let me get cleaned up and then I'll fill you in on the details." She slipped past him into the bathroom, dried off, and headed to her room for some dry clothes. Pulling on the first workout suit she could find (black with two crossed knives on the shoulder, her least favorite), she returned to the living room and poured herself another cup of tea.

"That stuff's got to be stone cold by now," Phil quipped.

"So I'll reheat it, no big deal." She stuck it into the microwave for a few seconds, and began sipping as soon as it was hot again.

"Care to tell me why you looked like you'd been swimming earlier? Or should I save the questions for Mom?"

"I told you I'd tell you after I got dry, didn't I?" Laura shook her head, then launched into her story. She swore she saw Phil smirking when she was done.

"Finally, someone who can take on my little sister and possibly win. I never thought I'd live to see the day."

"Shut up, Phil. It's not that funny. What if Ackerson does try using them to take me out? What then?"

"Paranoid, Laura, paranoid. If the Master Chief had wanted to kill you he'd have done it by now; goodness knows he's had plenty of opportunities to try. I don't think you should be worried."

Laura chose not to answer, but sipped her tea in silence. _And what if he's just biding his time, Phillip? ONI can afford to wait, as can the Spartans: they like to strike when least expected. If you were in my position, would you take that chance?_ She didn't like the thought of another confrontation, one where she could easily lose more than she could afford to pay.

10. Chapter 9: Nightmares or Memories?

Ok, this kind of ties in with the physical at the end of Chapter Two, where Laura recognizes the Flood DNA without knowing why. I'll be tying this in a bit later, so I won't say anything more. Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Nine: Nightmares or Memories?

****October 9, 2552 2330 hours****

****Gedeon Residence****

****North America****

Laura was due to return to Camp Hayes in two more days. Perhaps it was the stress from what she knew would be waiting for her, perhaps it was something else entirely. Whatever the case, her mother knew something was wrong when a loud yell from Laura's room in the night awakened her. Rushing into the room, Dr. Gedeon noticed Laura sitting bolt-upright in her bed, eyes wide with worry yet seeing nothing.

"Laura, what is it? What's wrong?" The sound of her voice jerked her daughter back to her surroundings, and she cried as if she were four years old again. _Something must have scared her, and scared her badly_, Dr. Gedeon thought.

"What happened, Laurabeth?" she asked again.

"A nightmare, but it seemed so real, like it wasn't a dream," Laura choked out. "I've had others like it, but they seemed so _real_, as if I were actually there!" She dimly felt her mother's arms around her, trying to calm her.

"Care to talk about it?" Laura nodded. Taking a deep breath, she began to tell her mother what she'd dreamed.

Thaddeus the Prophet noticed the young human scientist he'd been working with seemed more silent than usual. He could only guess as to why, since he knew so little about her; she never spoke unless it had regards to their work on the new combat armor system. Nevertheless, he felt it his duty to try and help her in some way.

"Alaya, is something troubling you?"

"It's nothing I cannot handle, Thaddeus." Alaya clearly didn't wish to discuss the matter, as she turned her dark head to a display panel.

"If it is truly nothing, why are you so silent?" Thaddeus asked, unwilling to let the young woman suffer in silence.

"I never said that it was nothing, I merely said that it was nothing I could not handle," she replied roughly, dark eyes beginning to shine with tears unwilling to be shed.

"Is it your father?" the old scientist asked, surprising the woman. _How did he know?_

"Yes, my father. How didâ€|?"

"I have contacts in the medical guild, and when I learned your father was General Petrarch, I contacted them at once. They told me he has the incurable cancer." Thaddeus was surprised to see the tears in Alaya's dark eyes, normally passive and emotionless.

"They say he will pass on soon. He and my brother are all I have left. I dare not look to anyone else; indeed, I cannot." Her face plainly said she didn't wish to continue the subject, and both scientists returned to their work.

Alaya and her younger brother were beside their father's deathbed two nights later. General Petrarch looked carefully at both of them.

"Alaya, Marin, you must look after yourselves now, but that does not mean you are to abandon the other. Marin, as my son, you must promise me you will give aid to Alaya whenever she should require it, whether she asks or not."

"I promise, Father," Marin whispered, a single tear sliding down his face. He never showed much emotion, being both a man and a newly-ordained soldier.

"Alaya, my beloved daughter and firstborn," Petrarch whispered.

"Yes, Father, I am here," Alaya murmured, trying to reassure her father in his final hours; she had inherited a double portion of her mother's caring nature.

"Alaya, you are my eldest child, and now my duties fall to you, as much as can be. Those duties Marin will take as the only son are his, but they may come to weigh heavily on him. Watch over your brother, care for him as best you can, that is my wish."

"Father, I promise I will fulfill your wishes, no matter what it takes." Alaya bowed her head, trying to hide her tears. She needed to be strong, for her brother's sake if nothing else.

"It is well. And now, both of you, I charge you to watch over each other in the years to come, for my heart warns of perils ahead. Be each others' strength, and remember everything you've learned. Farewell, my children, and do not weep, for I have fought the good fight." With those parting words, General Petrarch closed his eyes for the last time.

Most of those dwelling on the ringworlds, indeed throughout the whole of the galaxy, came to Halo-04 for the respected general's funeral.

Thaddeus himself stood there beside several other Prophets, who had heard much of the human general's deeds and had come to pay their respects. As most of the galaxy stood there, they saw Petrarch's two children standing beside the grave, silent and still, their tears long spent. The son wore a soldier's garb, while the daughter wore only simple black clothing, her dark hair pulled back from her face in a loose knot. When all was over, the Master of the Passing came and stood before the two children, looking at Petrarch's son in particular.

"Your father's spirit has yet to cross to paradise," he intoned, "and needs one to help him on his way. Who will guide your father's spirit?" The answer that came surprised all onlookers: it was the daughter who spoke.

"I will take the silent vigil. It is my right as elder child." Her brother looked at her once, then nodded assent. She stepped forward to her father's grave, seated herself, and began to watch. For three days she would sit, neglecting all other duties in favor of this most sacred tradition: the three day watch for those newly dead, so they could journey in peace to the paradise that awaited them. Most were surprised that Petrarch's son did not take the vigil, but Marin silenced the doubts with a single sentence:

"She is the elder, it is her right, and I will support her in that."

"And you don't know why you dreamed it?"

"No, Mom, I don't know. I don't know who they are, what they are, I just don't _know!_ I've had other dreams like this, and I can't explain it! Am I going mad, Mom? Is it some symptom from my augmentations?"

"Without knowing exactly what your augmentations were, I couldn't say. However, you seem physically and mentally sound, so I wouldn't worry on that count."

"But what does it _mean_?" Laura sobbed.

"I don't know, Laurabeth, I don't know."

After her mother left, Laura sat with her head in her hands. _Am I going insane?_ She had no answers, but answers were what she needed most. As she turned over the strange dream in her mind, since it was still so clear even after this long, she remembered the strange thought that had passed through her mind when she'd found the Flood genome in Sergeant Johnson's bloodwork. The thought had been just as clear, and just as well random as this dream had been. _There's got to be a connection, even if it's vague_, she thought. _The dreams, my recognizing that genome without knowing what it was, there _has _to be a connection._ A soft voice interrupted her musings.

"Another of those nightmares of yours?"

"Shut up, Lориenna. Not in the mood right now."

Lориenna chuckled softly. "Yep, must've been another of those weird dreams of yours. You always get cranky after one of those. This makes

what, ten screwball dreams so far?"

"You're keeping count?"

"Always. So, any theories on where they're coming from, or should I throw out a suggestion or two?"

"How about you shut up so I can go back to sleep?"

****October 10, 2552 0900 hours****

****Gedeon Residence****

Laura walked into the living room, intent on searching out some breakfast, and instead found her mother sitting in the living room.

"I hope I'm not the reason you're still here," Laura mused as she dropped a quick kiss on her mother's head.

"No, today's one of my few days off. Would you like breakfast?"

"Not just yet," she smiled as she sat down opposite Dr. Gedeon. The smile dimmed as a thought occurred to her. "I hope ONI didn't see me last night."

A low, melodious chuckle reverberated through the room.

"Don't worry, Miss Fearful, once I saw you weren't doing so hot I spliced their recordings. As far as their concerned you woke up, rolled over, and went back to sleep."

"Thanks, Lориenna." Laura shook her dark head, loose strands of hair falling in front of her eyes. "I just wish I knew what was going on."

"I can ask around the hospital, if you'd like," Dr. Gedeon offered, one slender hand holding her daughter's. "Someone there might know what's going on?"

"If I may, Doctor," Lориenna interjected, "perhaps we are being a bit too assuming. I have a theory, if I may propose it."

"Go ahead," the doctor replied.

"Well, for starters, Laura says the woman looked exactly like her. I know what you think about genetic memory, but isn't it possible in this case? How else do you explain the vivid dreams, dream that seem more like memories?"

"Makes sense," Laura mused, getting up and pacing the room. "But surely there's a more logical explanation?"

"At this point, no. If you like, I can check for other symptoms from your augmentation procedures, but it's a safe bet there'll be nothing on that route."

"In any case, worrying about it won't help," Dr. Gedeon pointed out. "We have other things to think about at this point, like getting Laura ready to head back tomorrow."

"You just _had_ to remind me," Laura grumbled.

11. Chapter 10: Reach Memories II

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Ten: Reach Memories Part II

****October 11, 2552 0730 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Having returned to duty after a brief period of leave, Laura stood near her window as she thought back once again to her brief sojourn to the planet Reach. This time she contemplated the second encounter with Dr. Halsey's Spartans.

****April 27, 2523 1130 hours****

****UNSC Military Complex, Reach****

****Epsilon Eridani System****

She'd been on Reach for almost two weeks, and had gotten more suspicious and jittery with each passing day. After her encounter with those Marines, she kept a concealed steak knife (commandeered from the base commissary) on her at all times: it wouldn't do any good explaining being armed to her mother if she was already dead. Most of the time Laura kept to the shadows, blending in with her surroundings as she'd been trained, and was still being trained. Occasionally, she ventured out into the open, but only when she was sure it was safe. It was on one such occasion that she noticed the rock-wall.

It was over twelve meters high, with safety harnesses and grips everywhere. There were three faces to the wall, each more difficult than the first. She noticed the third one had fewer grips and looked the most difficult. All the safety harnesses had been pulled to the top, since no one was using the wall at that point. _Doesn't look too hard_, she thought. _I'll give it a try, since no one's around to stop me and I have nothing better to do._

In the woods, supposedly on a training mission (but having given their instructors the slip yet again), the young Spartans watched as the mysterious young girl approached the rock-wall, sizing it up as she approached. Kelly shook her head and looked at the others.

"She can't be serious about climbing that, can she?"

"You would know better than the rest of us would, you've seen her in action," John replied.

"Look," Sam whispered, pointing to a figure at the very edge of their

field of vision. "Someone's watching her."

"It looks like the Chief," Kelly whispered in amazement.

Chief Petty Officer Mendez watched the young girl beginning to climb the rock-wall, with no safety harness and no visible precautions. _She's either very bold, very reckless, or very stupid_, he thought. As he watched, Laura gained about a meter's height, and continued climbing. Turning at a noise behind him, Mendez jumped and snapped off a hasty salute as Dr. Halsey and another ONI official approached.

"At ease, Chief Mendez," the ONI officer said crisply. "I see Laura's found the rock-wall to be too easy for her."

"You knew she'd be here?" Dr. Halsey asked.

"I had a feeling. As I recall, there's a note on her climbing ability in her file: she routinely escapes Camp Hayes on Earth by climbing fences, trees, and other things. She's had a lot of experience with heights."

"Speaking of heightsâ€¦|" Mendez muttered as they watched Laura get halfway up the wall.

Laura felt for the grips as she slowly climbed upwards. It was easier than it looked, for her at any rate. Years of climbing trees and fences had taught her how to find impossible grips. As she got higher, she refused to look down, focusing on the harness at the top. _Closer, closer, up we go!_ She climbed even higher, and saw she was about two meters away from the top when she missed a grip. Her hand slipped, and she started to slide down the wall. _No!_ She scrambled to find her footing as she slid to the ground.

Dr. Halsey and Chief Mendez watched as the young girl started to slide down the rock-wall, found a grip, and pin-wheeled her legs for a few seconds before finding a toehold. She pulled herself up and resumed her climb, finally reaching the very top of the wall.

"I don't believe it," Dr. Halsey whispered as the girl gripped the harness in both hands and rappelled down the wall, landing on her feet with no difficulty. "This is the test case, the so-called 'mistake'? She's just as skilled as the others."

"That may be, but she also has a number of psychological flaws, one of which being an unwillingness to hurt her opponents," the ONI officer replied.

"I see." Dr. Halsey watched as the girl turned and looked at them, dark eyes challenging, angry and aware, before she headed off into the woods. "Then leave her on Earth if you wish. I still see no reason to consider her a mistake."

As she landed at the foot of the rock-wall, Laura noticed the three adults standing in the distance. _They were watching me the whole time!_ Recognizing the Marine CPO, she scowled at him and turned her back, heading for the woods. Unconcerned with anything else, she stalked through, angry at the whole farce ONI had concocted.

As she walked through the undergrowth, her sharp ears registered

movement around her; she stopped and listened, her back against a tree trunk. A dark-skinned soldier stepped out from the growth, followed by one with sandy hair. A closer look revealed that they were her own age, and that they were both armed. _No way in hell,_ she thought, studying them closely as she guessed what they were planning. _No one is catching me today!_

As the pair got closer, Laura jumped, grabbed a tree branch, and swung over their heads. Executing a clean flip and landing on her feet, she took off like a shot deeper into the woods. Back home, she routinely ran the base tracks and raced a family friend's horses when she could, the end result giving her unusual speed for a twelve-year-old. She used that now as she fled the Spartans, hoping to shake them off and get back to the bunk she and her mother shared. Pausing a moment to listen, and hearing movement coming her way, she swung into a tree and climbed upwards. Like a squirrel, she swung and jumped from tree to tree, hoping to fool any trackers that way. Finally stopping in a tall oak, she rested and waited.

"Sam, Fhajad, are you sure she went this way?" she heard a voice nearby ask.

"Positive; no way she could have changed course without our seeing. She was clever, though, to climb that tree and try to fool us," the dark boy replied.

"True, but what if she never left the first tree?" the sandy-haired boy asked. "If she's still there, then she could easily double back and give us the slip."

"No, I don't think so," the first boy replied, a kid with buzz-cut brown hair and a stern face. "Look, bark pieces. She's nearby."

"Is she nearby, or has she been here and gone already?" a girl's voice asked. Peering through the leaves, Laura recognized the girl: Kelly, her ally when the Marines had attacked the second time. _Not cool_, she thought. _Guess I'll be stuck here for a while._

"Sam, Kelly, scout around. See if you can find any traces. Fhajad and I will stay put and see if she's still here." The sandy-haired boy and Kelly nodded, then moved off.

"Do you think she's still here, John?" the dark boy asked.

"Probably. There were no other traces pointing anywhere but here, so she has to be close."

Closer than you'd guess, Laura thought as she waited for them to turn their backs. Gripping a low-hanging branch, she swung out, flipped, and landed on her feet, running as swiftly as she could before the two young Spartans could gather their wits. The ground was hard, allowing for her to move quickly enough, but she needed some way to turn the tables and escape. _They obviously tracked me here, so I need to find a way to hide my trail._ Seeing where the ground began to look broken and rocky, she veered off in that direction, noticing as she turned that pursuit was still close behind. The dark boy, Fhajad, had fallen behind, but the one called John was still close. Kelly was moving past him, getting too close for her liking, and Sam was just in front of Fhajad. _They're definitely fast,

especially Kelly. If I can't find cover, she'll catch up for sure, and then there'll be trouble. _Turning her eyes forwards, Laura saw a dead-end up ahead: the rocky path she'd found ended in a cliff. She stopped short, seeing no way around, unlessâ€|there! That narrow ledge was just like the one on the river back home! If she could get to it quicklyâ€|There was nothing else for it. She jumped, landing neatly on the ledge, and began to move along it to safety. As Laura skirted the edge of the cliff, she listened to the voices above.

"I don't believe it," Kelly murmured as the girl dropped down to the ledge, moving along it as if it were a standard path. "She's still alive, and she hasn't fallen."

"If a civilian can do it, so can we," Sam muttered when the rest of the group caught up.

"I don't think so, Sam. It's too risky. Besides, we don't know anything about her, so why risk it?" John didn't want to risk losing his best friend.

"I'll be fine," Sam replied as he jumped down. His confident expression turned to fear, however, as he missed his footing. Just before he fell, a hand reached out and gripped his fatigues.

Laura had seen the boy jump after her, and knew he would go down for sure; his timing was off, and he had misgauged the distance. One foot connected with the ledge, the other hit empty space, throwing him off-balance. Reacting quickly, she shot her arm out and grabbed his uniform, yanking him back toward the cliff before he fell to his death.

"What the hell were you thinking? A soldier should have known better than to risk a jump like that without casing it first! You shouldn't have come after me, should've listened to your buddies."

"You didn't seem to have too much problem with the jump," the young Spartan replied, a sour look on his face.

"I grew up around these kinds of things, so I knew what to expect. Now shut up and follow me carefully, unless you want to learn to fly real fast." She carefully picked her way back to the top of the cliff, the boy following her closely. Dreading what she might find at the top, Laura moved her hand near her knife, just in case she needed it.

"Sam!" she heard Kelly call as soon as both of them were up top again.

"Why didn't you listen to me when I said not to go down there?" the brown-haired boy, John, asked, shaking his head.

So far, so good, she thought to herself. _They seem to be ignoring me. Maybe now I can get away._ She started edging back towards the woods, trying not to make a sound. Unfortunately, a quiet departure was not to be: Sam turned around and spotted her trying to slip away. He also noticed the hand hovering near her hip pocket.

"Where do you think you're going?" he challenged.

"Away from here, and away from you. You kids are more trouble than

you're worth, and I'd just as soon go home and have done," she shot back, her words sharper than she'd intended.

"You're calling _us_ kids? You're the same age we are," John yelled.

"Maybe, but at least _I_ know when not to take chances. And at least _I_ know who I can and cannot trust to let well enough alone." Laura was starting to get scared, but kept backing towards the woods, hoping to at least get to the tree line before all hell broke loose.

Just before she was near the trees, a Pelican roared overhead. Laura panicked and bolted, sure that ONI was looking for her, terrified that they'd spotted her. Her knife was out in a flash, and she took to the trees once again. Perched in an ancient pine, she waited as search teams swept past.

"According to the Pelican, she was here a little bit ago. Should we turn on the motion sensors?"

"No good in these woods, idiot. Too many animals, and those freak Section Three kids too." _Section Three? That's the ONI branch that trains me!_

As soon as the teams were clear, Laura dropped down and began to make her way back to the base. She wanted more than anything to go home; she was scared, lonely, and felt betrayed.

Climbing in through the window that night, Laura found her mother asleep and a small present waiting for her: a pair of combat knives was tucked under her pillow. With them was a note: _Just in case. Kelly._ In spite of her worries, Laura couldn't help but smile.

****October 11, 2552 0800 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

A Pelican roaring overhead on its way to the airfield jolted Laura out of her reverie. She shook her head sadly, wishing once again that she could have gotten to know the girl on Reach. _Ah well, wishing solves nothing_, she mused as she glanced at her knives. They were old, the sheaths were battered from years of use, but she still kept the knives in good condition. _The first gift from a friend I ever received. Thank you, Kelly. If only I could repay you for everything you did for me on Reach._ She picked up the knives and strapped them to her waist. It was time for a new day of chaos.

12. Chapter 11: Recon, Of Sorts

Paranoia chapter! Just thought this would be fun to write. Unfortunately this will be the last posting for a couple weeks: spring break at home, where dial-up and top net speeds of 36 kbps reign supreme. I promise I'll post something as soon as I get back!

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Eleven: Recon, Of Sorts

****October 13, 2552 1542 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Linda was watching the bunkhouse near the southern border of the base; apparently this was Blade's living quarters. Inserting a fiber-optic probe through a crack in the window frame, she sent back to her fellow Spartans an image of an unusually stressed young woman, pacing back and forth and talking to someone they couldn't see. Oddly enough, she was unarmed: usually she had at a pair of combat knives around her waist at all times.

"Lorienna, we don't have much time. Ackerson's sending me on another nasty black op, and I need all the info I can get."

"Say no more, I'll get right on it. What do you need?" The voice sounded familiar, almost Blade's but not quite; it took Linda a moment to recognize it as belonging to Laura's personal AI.

"I need whatever you can find in ONI's database on the Covenant: weaponry, personnel, tech files, ship schematics, anything you can dig up." Blade paused for a moment and added, almost as an afterthought, "If you can pull files on the Spartans, that would be good, too."

"Perhaps I misheard, Laura," the disembodied voice replied. "You want data on the Spartans as well?"

"Yes, you heard correctly. In order to enact the perfect mission, one must know the strengths and weaknesses of all the participants. I need to know exactly what these people are capable of, how they work in certain environments, what makes them tick. Trust me, I know what I'm doing."

"Of course you do, and yet, I wonder if this is the entire reason for your interest in those particular files." There was a hint of amusement in Lorienna's tone, enough to make Blade stop pacing and glare at someone Linda couldn't see.

"Just get the files as soon as you can, and we're doing a direct transfer to save time."

"You realize that's going to be painful," Lorienna cautioned. "With the amount of data coming in, there's a risk of informational overload."

"We don't have time to do things safely. Just do the data transfer, and hope." Blade flipped up her braid of dark brown hair to expose her neural interface, and slipped on an unusual headset: it had a point that mated perfectly with her neural interface. Once she had the headset on, Blade flipped a switch and winced as a flood of

digital information filled her brain. Watching her face, Linda realized it must have hurt like hell.

"Ow, that hurt," she murmured weakly. "But I think it was worth it. Okay, let's see what we have to work with." She began pacing again, this time appearing less panicked and more thoughtful.

Blade suddenly stopped pacing and looked around, apparently sensing something amiss. She stared hard at the window, and Linda moved away, hiding herself only just in time. Blade came to the window, found the probe, and snapped it in half as easily as if it was only a twig. She scanned the area, a nervous look in her eyes. A moment later, Linda heard her voice, and it almost sounded worried.

"Lorienna, boost intruder countermeasures to peak levels, and lock every door and window. Do it NOW!" There was a definite sense of panic in her voice now.

Linda moved quickly, slipping in the door before it was shut and locked. She soft-footed it through the bunkhouse, marveling at the carved wooden items, the sparse yet comfortable-looking furnishings, and a good-sized family portrait on one wall. She slowed when she heard Blade's voice.

"Ok, let's go over the Spartans' basic strengths and weaknesses. I know they're the best, but even the greatest things have flaws; it proves they're normal. We'll start with SPARTAN-043, William: quiet, dependable, gets the job done, pretty decent tracker, his only real weakness being his stubborn determination to win. They all have that flaw, thanks to ONI: losing is unacceptable, winning is everything.

"SPARTAN-058, Linda: loner, crack shotâ€"better than me accuracy wise, her weakness being that she's a lonerâ€"could be a liability in group environment, not to mention that it could easily get her killed when she's on her own.

"SPARTAN-104, Frederic: good leadership skills, decent close-combat specialist, quick to think on his feet, reliable to an extent. Weakness: he feels a bit much for his team, and hates losing to the point of jealousyâ€"could be detrimental in the extreme. Keep an eye on that one, I don't trust him.

"SPARTAN-117, John: Squad leader, brave, apparently a good strategist/leader. Obvious weakness: he tries to win rather than survive. Again, they all think winning is life, and have no consideration for basic survival outside of the mission. Sad, really."

"What exactly do you mean?" the AI asked.

"You above all people shouldn't need to ask me that," Blade replied quietly. _No one every taught then that there was more to life than winning, poor souls_. She smirked at the thought of what people might say if they knew what she was thinking. "You know my mind better than most. Now, let's look at the Covenant data, what we have anyway. The Spartans will definitely be an asset here, they're bound to be more familiar with Covenant warships than I am."

"I wouldn't be so sure. You've had a lot of experience as well,"

Lorienna replied.

"Mostly freighters, and the occasional dropship. They've been onboard cruisers more than I have. Now, the plans?"

A schematic of a Covenant cruiser popped onscreen on a data terminal nearby. Blade studied it intently, looking at key areas on the ship: bridge, engineering, barracks, medical. One unusual room caught her eye, and she prodded the image with the eraser end of a pencil.

"Lorienna, what is this?"

"It would appear to be a central access point for the Covenant environmental controls. Specifically, this recycles their atmosphere, which is mostly oxygen. The atmospheric controls for the Grunts' barracks appear to be unaffected by this air recycling system."

"Interesting, a possible weak point in the mighty Covenant armor," Blade mused, tapping the pencil thoughtfully against her chin. "There may be something there we can use. See if you can find anything more." She turned around in time to see Linda standing in the doorway. Her shock lasted only for a minute or two before she assumed a fighting stance, clearly expecting the worst.

"What the hell are you doing here? How did you get in?"

"Why I'm here is not important. As for getting in, I managed to slip in the door before you locked it down. What are you doing with our files?"

"Trying to figure out a way to complete an impossible mission, not that it really concerns you. Besides, I'm not stupid: once the mission is over I'll be dead either way." Blade's dark eyes narrowed dangerously, reminding Linda of the briefing they'd had with Ackerson a couple weeks ago. "You and your ilk aren't welcome in my quarters. If you're as smart as your files portray, you'll leave and not come back. Unless you really want to see what I'm capable of, I suggest you leave."

"I doubt you'd try to kill me," Linda replied. "If that were the case, you would have tried it by now. Maybe you should reconsider before something happens that you'll regret."

"I've been regretting things for nearly thirty years, so what's one more. Now get out." Blade clearly wasn't going to allow her near, so Linda pretended to listen. As she made her way to the exit, a voice seemed to echo in her mind: it was as though an AI was interfacing with her neural net.

"Don't worry, she's just paranoid lately. Stay here and listen, I'll try and take care of everything"

Linda stopped and listened, her sharp ears catching the conversation between Blade and the disembodied voice of Lorienna, who apparently had some sort of plan in mind.

"You know, Laura, that was rude even by your standards."

"She's ONI. She and the others trust ONI to the core, and would do anything they were ordered to do without question. They're going with me to capture the Covenant ship, but I have a feeling they'll be the only ones coming back."

"You seriously don't thinkâ€" the AI began.

"Yep. If Ackerson ordered them to kill me and gave them even a vague reason as to why, they'd do it without question. I can take out one, maybe two if I'm lucky, but not all of them at once."

"I seriously doubt they'd kill you without question. Perhaps you're just being paranoid since Ackerson hates you."

"Lorienna, trust me. I know what I see. I know people, even those who barely qualify as such, and Ackerson most definitely fits into that latter category. I've had thirty-seven years to learn about the world, and I don't like some of what I'm seeing. People respect and fear the Spartans, but they hate and fear me, and they always will, even though I'm one of them." Blade shook her dark hair out of her eyes, since a few strands had come out of her braid. "I'll always be alone. Not even the Spartans would befriend me even if it were allowed."

"The way you just treated that one, I'm not surprised they're less than interested in your company."

"Even if I were civil, they wouldn't associate with me. They think I'm a civilian, of all things." Blade paused, her eyes narrowing again. "You had to have known she was here, Lorienna. You knew and gave no warning. Why?"

"You can't continue like this, Laura, it's killing you," the AI responded. "Yes, I knew she was there, and I knew she was unarmed. It won't hurt to trust them a little, but you've been hunted for so long you see death in every place. This can't continue."

"Lorienna, why have you betrayed me?" Blade asked, her voice cracking slightly as one hand maneuvered over a keyboard. Linda realized she was powering down the AI, and Lorienna must have realized it too. When the AI spoke again, her voice was sad and resigned.

"To have done nothing would have been a greater betrayal, Laura. The Spartans aren't your enemy, ONI is. They don't know what happened to you, but they aren't as cold-blooded as you fear. You simply refuse to see it." Then there was silence. As Linda watched, Blade clenched her hands into fists, obviously trying to regain control. Her dark eyes flicked to a small dresser nearby, and she moved out of sight for a moment; when she came back, there was a pair of combat knives strapped to her waist. Clearly she was planning to make sure her bunk was secure; Linda moved quietly back towards the bunkhouse entrance, slipping out of the door. She'd barely made it out of sight when Blade exited, dark eyes flicking around. Just as she was approaching Linda's hiding place, a noise distracted her.

"Blade!"

Helljumpers, great, Laura winced inwardly as she saw the soldiers approaching. Rookies, too, from the looks of things. Glad that she

had her knives with her, even though she hoped she wouldn't need them, she stood nonchalantly as they approached.

"Do you have nothing better to do than waste my time?" she drawled, trying hard to sound bored; inside she was angry at what she knew would be coming.

"Why ain't you on the front lines where you belong, freak?" the leader asked.

"Gee, maybe because the brass won't let me go? I'd much rather be out there than cooling my heels here." She tried hard to keep her voice controlled, knowing how bad it would get if she let the hurt show, and knowing what else was coming.

"Don't get insolent with me, freak," the lead snarled. "I'll wipe the floor with you."

"Bring it."

Linda watched in fascination as the four Helljumpers charged, each trying to catch her off guard. Blade stood her ground, waiting for them to get in close, then flipped over the one in front of her. Grabbing his wrist, she twisted and broke it, kicked him in the chest, and smacked him in the side of the head; the Helljumper dropped to the ground, out cold, and Blade turned to deal with the rest of the attackers. She was a blur of motion, kicking, blocking, punching, and dodging with lightning speed. In a matter of seconds, it was all over, and the four soldiers were unconscious in front of their target, who shook her head sadly.

"When are they ever gonna learn?" she murmured sadly, before she went back inside.

Lorienna had guessed that her creator would shut her down, once she knew that she'd let SPARTAN-058 slip into the bunkhouse. She also knew she'd only have a few milliseconds before complete shutdown, and had slipped into ONI's networks for safety's sake. Lorienna sensed the various AIs in the system, including the famed Cortana, and avoided them as best she could. It was easy for her to lie low in the system, and as soon as she could she slipped herself into Nicole Mitchell's terminals. _I'll be safe here, at least until Laura comes to her senses and reactivates my terminal. She's never been like this before, but then again she's never had reason to be before. I wish I could help her, but what can an AI do, especially when she's powered down?_

When Nicole turned on her computer terminal later that evening, Lorienna materialized next to her.

"Miss Mitchell, we have a problem."

"What else is knew?" As Lorienna relayed her creator's activities to her best friend, Nicole sighed and shook her head.

"I should have guessed this would happen sooner or later. She's becoming more paranoid every day, thanks to ONI. Lie low here for a bit, Lorienna, until she comes to her senses. She always does, after a while."

"I hope you're right, Miss Mitchell. If she doesn't, I'm not sure what might happen."

13. Chapter 12: Benefit of the Doubt

Sorry for the long delay, but I'm back with a few more new tidbits! Hope you enjoy! Oh, and if anyone has a new idea they'd like to share, or anything they'd like to see, let me know.

Chapter Twelve: Benefit of the Doubt

****October 20, 2552 1230 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Laura was down in what she tended to call her 'workshop' when she heard someone knocking at the door of her bunkhouse. _Damn! Who could that be?_ For the thousandth time she cursed the stubborn pride which had made her power down her AI friend, knowing that answering the door would be complicated. ONI didn't know about her 'workshop', so every time she went down there she had to loop the electronics. If she answered the door, she'd have to hack into the networks later and 'tailor' the recordings to fit. If Lorienna had still been online, she would have covered for her automatically. _Maybe they'll just go away_, she thought, then winced as the knocking got even louder. _Whoever that it, they'd better have a damn good reason for dropping by_, she fumed as she crept up from her workshop and to the front door.

"Nick! What a surprise! I wasn't expecting any company?"

"I figured you'd be getting lonely, so I thought I'd pop in for a visit. Interested in a walk?"

"One sec," Laura muttered as she busied herself at a computer terminal. In a few minutes, she stood up and nodded. "Let me grab a jacket and I'll be right there."

The two friends left the base relatively unopposed, since all Laura had to do was glare at any mouthy Marines to get them to shut up. Laura noticed where Nicole was leading her: the woods behind the base, a relatively quiet place where it was hard to be overheard. _Must have something important on her mind_, she mused.

"Why did you shut down Lorienna?" Nicole asked suddenly. The question stopped Laura dead in her tracks.

"How did you know?"

"Isn't it enough that I do?" Her friend gave her a hard look. "What the hell's gotten into you? You're becoming more paranoid every day, and a lot of it is baseless!"

"Baseless my ass, Nick," Laura replied softly, her quiet voice laced with anger. "Ackerson's getting desperate. Right after I powered

Lorienna down, I got jumped by ODS'Ts when I was securing my bunk. Rookies, so they didn't know any better than to come at me in a small group. Plus, before I powered her down, she'd let one of them into my bunk. She wasn't armed, but who knows what might have happened if she had been?"

"Laura, if they're anything like you are, then they don't need a weapon to kill. She could have killed you any time when she was in there, and she didn't. Care to explain that away?" Nicole shook her head at her friend's silence. "Maybe you could try giving them the benefit of the doubt, or at least be civil in their company."

"And if they try something? What do I do then?" Laura challenged.

"Trust me, they won't. I've been listening, and I think you've confused them a bit. From the sounds of things, they're curious." Nicole smiled. "Besides, with a blade in your hand you can take on anyone and win, remember?"

"I try not to."

After she got back to the base, Laura thought long and hard about her actions over the past few weeks. Maybe I was wrong, but maybe not. How can I be sure?_ She couldn't know, but she knew there was one action she could correct. Swallowing her pride, Laura moved to the terminal, entering a passcode, password, and retina scan. The prompt for the voiceprint came up, and Laura smiled a little as she recited:

"United we stand, now and forever; E Pluribus Unum, out of many one."

"About damn time you came to your senses," her own voice came back at her, sharp and angry. Laura's smile widened.

"Nice to see you too, Lorienna."

Lorienna's slender form swirled into place beside her, waved a hand, and smirked.

"Cameras disabled. Feel free to do whatever."

"Ok, meet me downstairs. I could use your help on my latest 'project'."

Lorienna's eyes sparkled with laughter, and she giggled. "Being sneaky, are we?"

"Yep. Interested or no?"

"Right with you."

****October 24, 2552 1525 hours****

****Gedeon Residence****

****North America****

Laura had been up late for some time, hiding out in her 'workshop'

while she worked on her latest project. On one of her missions, she'd gotten her hands on about twelve Covenant camouflage devices. She'd promptly given them to ONI when she'd returned, but had only given them ten of the devices. Two of them went down to her 'workshop' for research. Oh, if ONI knew what I'd done to that old bunker they'd have a fit, she thought with an evil grin on her face. That old bunker had proven itself to be quite useful: she mostly used it to work on the various gadgets she used for her missions, the toys she didn't want ONI to find out about. It also made a neat little hidey-hole, as Sergeant Johnson had found out for himself.

Perched in a tree in her mother's backyard, Laura grinned even wider. It had taken a lot of time, and a lot of sleepless nights, but she'd almost figured out the camouflage devices the Covenant used. Oddly enough, the technology seemed familiar, like she'd seen it somewhere before. No matter, I'll remember where I saw it later, she mused as she sat in the tree. She'd taken the generator apart, studied its workings, and had tried to improve on it. Now she was trying to test it, see if she could improve the cloak's duration. Nine minutes, she thought, just as her mother exited the house.

Dr. Gedeon looked around the apparently empty backyard, trying to find her daughter. They were supposed to have guests for dinner, and while some may not be the guests Laura would appreciate, she was still going to be there regardless.

"Laura Elizabeth! Oly Oly En Free!" she called. When no response came, she muttered under her breath, "Laura, where are you?"

"Right here." The reply came from out of nowhere, and there was no one who could have made it. A few seconds later, a smiling woman materialized in a maple tree behind the house, dropping down next to her mother and brushing little pieces of maple bark off her clothes.

"Rats, almost ten minutes. I still haven't got this thing figured out yet," she muttered, staring intently at a device on her wrist. Looking up, she gave her mother a lopsided grin. "What's up?"

"We're having guests for dinner tonight, so I need you to look presentable."

"That might be a challenge," Laura smirked. "We both know how good-looking I'm not. I'll do my best, though." Still smiling, she and her mother walked inside, unaware that they were being watched by Spartans. The Spartans were quite confused: what had Dr. Gedeon called, and why did it sound so much like their 'all clear' signal? And how had Blade managed to create a stealth generator?

Two hours later, General West and the four Spartans were walking up to the front of the house, and the general knocked politely. Dr. Gedeon opened the door and ushered him inside.

"General, come on in. Laura's putting the finishing touches to dinner and dessert, and I've decanted a bottle of cabernet sauvignon." As the Spartans followed the two, they noticed the simple, homey furnishings and the pictures on the walls. On the west wall of the main room, which shared with the kitchen, were four pictures: a family photo (similar to the one Linda had seen in Laura's bunkhouse), and individual photos of the three children. Laura's

picture stood out, if only because of the cool look on her face—cool, but with something else that captivated the Master Chief, something he couldn't name. His reverie was interrupted by a timer going off loudly, then being suddenly cut off by somebody in the kitchen. There was a subsequent rattle and banging of dishes, and a cheery voice calling from the kitchen:

"Dinner's ready, if anyone wants it."

Dr. Gedeon led the way into the dining room, where a deceptively simple assortment of food was laid ready: some kind of meat dish in creamy tomato sauce, mixed vegetables, pasta, fresh-baked rolls, and a delectable-looking salad. Distracted by the spread, no one noticed the arrival of the 'assistant chef' until she'd placed a stick of butter on the table beside the rolls. Her hair was wound into a bun, and she was wearing a blue velveteen top, but it was definitely Laura. Glancing at her face, John swore he saw a small smile forming at the corners of her mouth.

"Well, Laura, I must say I'm quite pleased with the layout," Dr. Gedeon quipped, prompting her daughter to raise an eyebrow in amusement.

"Hey, you did most of the cooking, I just set it out. Anyways, I can't wait to get started."

"By all means, everyone help themselves." The Spartans were a little hesitant, until they noticed Laura take a portion of the tomato sauced dish: apparently it was made up of meatballs, of sorts. She carefully spooned two balls on top of a mound of pasta, dribbled a bit of sauce on top, and rounded off her plate with vegetables, a buttered roll, and a bowl of the salad next to her plate.

"Skimping, eh?" she smiled at West's comment, knowing she'd easily taken less than her share, and much less than she normally ate.

"I know what's coming for dessert, and I'm saving room. Of course I'm skimping. Besides, Hungarian meatballs are very rich." Her dark eyes sparkled as she noticed how little the Spartans had taken of the Hungarian meatballs. "Oh, come now, they're also very good. Now the rolls you might want to watch out for—" She grinned mischievously as Fred, who'd just taken a bite of his roll, paled even more than he already was.

"Not nice, Laurabeth, not nice," her mother frowned.

"Sorry, couldn't resist."

She carefully cut into her meatballs, and lifted a steaming forkful into her mouth. Chewing and swallowing, she smiled, a genuine smile the Spartans had never seen on her face before.

"As usual, Mom, cooked to perfection."

"Thank you, Laura. Care for a roll?" Laura's dark eyes sparkled with laughter at the look on Fred's face as she bit into the roll, smiled in satisfaction, and went on eating. Everyone got really silent after that, as they got down to the serious business of eating the solid, home-cooked meal. General West eventually pushed back his plate, and sighed in satisfaction.

"Well, Dr. Gedeon, I must say your cooking is definitely superb."

"Just wait until you see what Laura pulls out for dessert," the elderly doctor smiled. Laura rolled her eyes and disappeared into the kitchen. She re-emerged a moment later with an unusual-looking cake on a plate in one hand, and a pile of dessert plates in the other.

"It's not that good, Mom. It didn't even turn out the way it was supposed to, at any rate I'm not happy with it."

"What is it?" West asked as he looked at the cake; it was rounded and frosted with chocolate icing, and sprinkled on top with powdered sugar.

"A Yule Log cake. It's a traditional French Christmas dessert. Yes, I know it's not Christmas, but I made one anyway." Laura began cutting into the cake, and they saw it was a white cake, frosted on the inside with chocolate and rolled up to resemble a tree log. She put the first slice on a dessert plate and set it to the side, cutting another slice right after. After cutting seven slices, she set the knife down and gestured to the cake.

"Help yourselves," she said as she took a slice for herself and began eating.

The Spartans looked at each other, and each took a slice of cake and began eating. They were surprised by the taste; it was delicious, considering it had been baked by a military person. Clearly, Blade knew more than just combat techniques; if she had assisted in any way with the dinner, she could most definitely out-cook the kitchen staff on base, who never really served anything appetizing. Glancing down the table, they noticed Blade suddenly seemed uneasy, as if she remembered something she hadn't done that she should have.

"I should be going," she said quietly after a while.

"Why? There's no reason for you to leave so soon," Dr. Gedeon replied, puzzled by her daughter's statement.

"There's something I need to take care of, and it can't wait. Sorry to eat and run," she murmured and got up abruptly, leaving the table. A few moments later a door opened and closed as Laura left the house. Through a window, the Spartans saw her heading northeast, almost back towards the base, but not quite.

Having been caught on the hop when she'd seen the Spartans at dinner that night, Laura had managed to keep herself quiet. Nicole's words had come to mind: _Maybe you could try giving them the benefit of the doubt, or at least be civil in their company._ After trying to keep an open mind as her friend had suggested, she'd even surprised to see them both mildly interested at this new side of her life, and a bit surprised at her seemingly quicksilver attitude. _Maybe that'll keep them guessing_, she thought. _I still don't trust them, but maybe they're not out to get me. Then again, with ONI, who knows?_ Her life had taken a turn for the confusing lately, and when she needed advice most she had no idea where to turn, except to her dear, departed grandmother. Bringing her mind back to the present, Laura focused on

the headstone, and the tall candle flickering before the grave.

"Dr. Gedeon, why did she need to leave?" West asked.

"I'm not sure, unlessâ€¦no, that can't be. She's long over that by now, she has to be." Something had apparently come to the doctor's mind, but she brushed it aside immediately, as if it was an impossibility.

"Dr. Gedeon?" West insisted. "What is it?"

"I just remembered today's date, General. It'sâ€¦it _was_â€¦her grandmother's birthday. Every time her birthday rolled around, Laura used to light a candle for her grandmother; I doubt she still does it anymore. Besides, she's long over that, at least she should be."

The Master Chief looked at Linda, who nodded and left the room. She headed in the general direction Laura had gone, and found herself heading towards a cemetery. Moving into the shadows, she scouted the area, eyes open, and noticed a soft glow nearby. Laura was sitting in front of a marble headstone, a lit candle in a tall glass sitting before her. She sat that way for hours until the candle finally went out. Linda could still see the candle, in spite of the darkness: it hadn't burned out at all. It was almost as though someone had blown it out, but how was that possible?

"Happy Birthday, Nana," Laura's voice came from the darkness, softer and sadder than she'd heard yet. _She's never acted like this before_, Linda thought to herself. _I need to find out more about Blade, and I don't think it's going to be easy._

"I wish I could still have your advice the way I did when I was little," Laura was softly murmuring. "I wish you were still here, so I could at least talk to someone who understands. I miss you, Nana." With that, Laura picked up the candle and rose, a sigh of regret echoing through the night as she moved off towards Camp Hayes.

Laura had smiled a bit when she saw the candle go out. There were a number of reasons it could be explained logically, but she preferred to believe her grandmother was letting her know that everything would be okay. _I miss you, Nana, I really do_. With a sigh, she got up and headed back to her bunk. ONI was sending her out on another mission tomorrow, and she needed to gather her gear and rest a little before she shipped out. As she left the cemetery, Laura turned around. Was thatâ€¦no, probably just a trick of the shadows. _Besides, why would a Spartan be interested in a cemetery?_

14. Chapter 13: A Couple Twists of Fate

This kind of ties in what's already happened to what's coming. Plus, it introduces a new threat to Blade from the Covenant: a grudge-bearing Elite with aspirations of glory. Enjoy!

Chapter Thirteen: A Couple Twists of Fate

****October 28, 2552 1938 hours****

****Covenant Freighter****

****Unknown System****

Laura was in the process of capturing a small Covenant freighter, no easy task considering she was going one against a thousand or so Covenant warriors. Her portable shield, one of the many little secrets and gadgets whose development she was keeping hidden from ONI, had helped her nearly complete the mission. She'd almost reached her objective, but something warned her to turn and make sure she was secure before heading onto the command deck. As she turned, a camouflaged Elite materialized from the shadows, flashed an energy blade, and charged.

Maro 'Iramee had managed to track this elusive human from the moment he had begun causing mayhem upon his ship. _Now I shall show this creature what it means to attack its betters_, he thought as he deactivated his active camouflage. He much preferred it that the cretin see who would be his demise. Roaring a challenge, 'Iramee raised his energy blade and charged.

Laura stood her ground until the Elite was close, then she moved to the side. Raising a hand, she karate-chopped viciously on the Elite's sword-arm, hoping to disarm it before it killed her. Her plan didn't work out as well as she'd hoped, seeing as her hand practically bounced off its wrist, but it caught the Elite off-guard and gave her a chance. Gripping his sword-arm in both hands, the slightly slippery feel of an energy shield beneath her fingers, Laura twisted hard, hearing the slight crack of bones fracturing as she wrenched the sword away from him. The Elite bellowed and swung at her head; Laura dodged and staggered back as the blow fell on her shoulder. Another near-miss landed on her leg, and she flipped backwards to avoid another blow. _I don't have time for this_, she fumed as her opponent kicked her in the shin. _Screw this_, she thought and kicked it in the leg, bringing a warble of surprise from the Elite. She then launched into the martial arts that she'd learned on Earth so thoroughly, hoping they would render her opponent unconscious at the very least. If not, well, hopefully he'd be disoriented enough for her to escape. Once she finished her mission, she could deal with him when she had more time.

The first strike, aimed at its head, was blocked, and her opponent aimed a kick at her head, which she blocked and returned. The Elite counterblocked, and lashed out at her head again, which she dodged easily enough. One hand connected with what she guessed to be its ribs, and she swore she heard a grunt of pain. The Elite lunged, trying to knock her off balance; she sidestepped and it turned again. She took a big risk and stepped closer, hoping to get it in a headlock and knock it out. It didn't work: the Elite took advantage of her proximity and grabbed her by the neck. She started choking, and did the only thing she could think of to do, something that disgusted her no end; tilting her head down, Laura tried to bite her opponent's arm. The Elite's shield held, but it dropped her in surprise, and she scrambled up and kicked. Her left leg connected with its chest, and the Elite grunted in pain as a good portion of her body weight connected with bruised ribs. She lashed out again, catching it in the head as she flipped on her hands, landed on her feet, and launched a one-two punch at its head. The Elite seemed to be taking the beating hard, finally, and Laura launched a final roundhouse kick to finish it off, for now.

'Iramee hadn't expected the human creature to be so fast, anymore

than he'd expected it to be so proficient at close combat. In the beginning he'd had the upper hand, in spite of the vermin getting his sword away from him. Before the end, though, he soon found himself fighting for his life. Block, strike, counterstrike, counterblock, none of it seemed to stall the relentless human attack. _If I do not leave now, I will perish and this human will go unopposed_, he realized. Suddenly breaking off, he activated his cloak and vanished. _Another day, human_, he thought, _another day._

Laura was caught by surprise when the Elite turned and fled, disappearing when it activated its camouflage, but she didn't dare pause to contemplate. She still had a mission to finish, and she turned and headed to the command deck, melting into every shadow. _I'll think about this later, or give it to the ghouls in ONI to chew on_, she thought to herself as she completed the mission she had been assigned.

'Iramee waited in the escape pod he had commandeered and launched as he contemplated the new enemy he had just escaped. That he was human was unquestionable, but his tactics were more like his own people's than those of the human vermin. It galled him to have had to abandon the battle, but it had not been a total failure: he could report of this new human foe to his commanders, offer to slay him, and receive a promotion, perhaps even the blessings of the Holy Ones themselves. _It will be a glorious day when I defeat the human vermin_, he thought, musing on the glories to come.

****October 30, 2552 1800 hours****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Having left the Covenant freighter outside of UNSC-controlled space, Laura returned to Earth and reported in for debriefing. Ackerson was less than pleased with her success, as usual. _He still thinks he can use the Covenant to wipe me out, fool._ By the time she returned to her bunk, which was at a late hour, she wanted nothing more than to rip his head off, but knew better than to try. _One day he'll get his comeuppance, I guarantee it, just not now_, she thought sleepily as she turned in.

****October 31, 2552 0015 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****Camp Hayes****

Laura woke up in the middle of the night, fully alert, with no idea why until she looked out her window and saw the full moon on the green hills beyond the base. It was nights like this when she got hit hard by the beauty of nature, and longed to dance in the night like women of old she'd read about in her history texts. This wasn't the first time she'd felt the hills calling, and she knew she could not deny the call; she'd tried once, but in the end had slipped out anyways. Throwing her blanket and sheet off of her, she slipped out, knowing that Lorienna would cover her tracks. The night was cool, but not overly so, and Laura knew she could endure much colder nights. Wearing only her thin white nightgown, she hugged the shadows and headed to the fence surrounding the base. Coming to a portion of the

fence, she pushed lightly and slipped out through the portal she had made for nights like this one, and for the occasional sneaking out just to escape. Once she was through, Laura closed the door and ran lightly through the wooded area behind the base. Anyone watching her would have noticed a striking difference from when she ran the track on the base. There she ran to push herself beyond her limits and prove her worth, but here she ran just for the joy of being alive, the thrill of the night around her and the call of the hills echoing throughout her body.

Once she'd cleared the woods, Laura ran lightly up the hillsides, dancing in the cool grass wet with dew. The moonlight threw her shadow out behind her, and they both danced together beneath the moon and the stars, Laura feeling enough joy that she seemed to be intoxicated. When she'd worn herself out dancing in the moonlight, Laura sat down on the crest of the hill, lifted her panpipes to her lips and began to play: some sixth sense had told her to bring them with her before she left her quarters. The tune she played was strangely and surprisingly mournful; it was the tune she'd played at her grandmother's funeral, but why was she playing it now? _I don't understand. What's going on?_ She felt with absolute certainty that there was some other force at work than coincidence or the call of the hills.

John and Will happened to be walking around the base in the middle of the night; for some strange reason neither of them could sleep. They had just rounded the corner of a warehouse when they saw a figure in white slip out of a window and head for the fence bordering the base. She slipped out of sight for a while, and by the time they saw her again she was already on the other side of the fence and running through the woods.

"How did she get out so fast?" Will wondered aloud.

"Never mind that. Looks like she's heading for the hills. Let's follow her and see what she's up to." Will nodded, agreeing to John's suggestion, and both headed toward the base gate.

As if to confirm her fears, Laura finished her tune in enough time to notice she was being watched—watched by two of the Spartans that had arrived last month! _Oh shit,_ she breathed inwardly, _how did they find me? What do I do?_ With no weapons, and being completely exposed, Laura was at a tactical disadvantage. She saw them starting to climb the hill, and that gave her a chance: the hill where she was sitting was steep enough to occupy their entire attention on climbing it. Thinking quickly, Laura bounced up on her feet and sprinted down the hillside toward the woods: a dangerous tactic on a steep slope, but she was in a hurry. She barely made it to the shadow of the trees before they topped the hill, and had just shimmied up into a tall red maple when the handsome one came looking into the trees; fortunately, he couldn't see her through the thick, crisscrossing branches beneath her.

"I don't see anything, Will. There were tracks in the dew, but they fade out once they reach the trees." His voice was hard as iron, but Laura thought she heard a subtle music beneath the stern tones. _Ok, why am I suddenly finding various aspects about the Master Chief attractive?_ _She didn't like the thought of being—|intrigued—|with a potential threat.

"John, I found something," his companion called from the hilltop.

Laura, still seated in the boughs of the red maple, watched in shock as Will approached and held up her panpipes. _How could I forget those? I didn't even notice I'd left them behind!_

"What do you think these are? Some kind of weapon?"

"No, I don't think so. Too many holes, and definitely too many pipes. It could be an instrument of some sort. Let's take it with us, maybe there's someone on base who knows what they are."

As they turned away, Laura dropped out of the tree as silently as she could and slipped behind the trunk. She didn't come out from behind until she was sure they were headed away from her. But even as she watched them walk away, the Chief turned and looked at her. Their eyes met briefly, and he seemed puzzled. He shook his head to clear his vision, and Laura seized the opportunity to slip into the shadows.

By the time they got close to the hills, they heard a mournful melody floating down from the top of the hill nearest the woods. They looked up and saw the woman in white seated on the hilltop, the moonlight glistening off her dark hair; there was something familiar about her face. She looked up and seemed to see them watching her, but made no move to run. John looked at Will, and they both nodded and started to climb. When they looked up to the top again, however, there was no sign of the mysterious woman in white. They climbed upwards with renewed strength, and saw tracks in the dewy grass going every direction.

"How did she find the time to cover her trail before we got up here?" John shook his head in amazement.

"I don't think she did," Will said, his tone intense as he scanned the grass. "Look, two sets of tracks heading towards those woodsâ€"one coming and one going."

As John headed towards the woods, he noticed both sets of tracks stopped right as the trees began. _No surprise there, considering the amount of shade here._

"I don't see anything, Will. There were tracks in the dew, but they fade out once they reach the trees."

Stopping under a red maple tree, he thought he heard movement in the branches above him; before he could investigate, however, Will's voice interrupted him.

"John, I found something." Will had been checking the hilltop, and had literally stumbled on the strange object: it seemed to be comprised of several ornately carved wooden pipes bound together by strings of plaited leather.

"What do you think these are? Some kind of weapon?"

"No, I don't think so," John replied. "Too many holes, and definitely too many pipes. It could be an instrument of some sort. Let's take it with us, maybe there's someone on base who knows what they are."

As they started walking back to the base, John swore he felt something watching him; when he got to the hilltop, the feeling intensified to the point where he just had to look. Standing at the edge of the tree line was the mysterious woman in white. He got a good look at her face: it was strikingly pretty, with wisps of dark hair drifting around it. What caught his attention most were the woman's dark eyes, and the look of sadness that seemed to haunt them. The sight was too eerily beautiful to be true. _I must be seeing things,_ he thought as he shook his head to clear it. While he was trying to clear his head, he realized why the face looked so familiar. _Blade! _When he looked up again, she was gone.

****November 2, 2552 0015 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****Camp Hayes****

Laura woke up again, knowing that the hills were calling once again. As she exited her bed, Lorienna's voice halted her.

"Are you sure this is a good idea? Last time you almost got caught."

"The hills are calling, Lorienna. I can't stay away. Don't worry, I'll be fine."

After she slipped out of the window, Lorienna's voice echoed through an empty room.

"That's why I'm worried."

Laura ran lightly through the woods again, feeling the chill of the night around her. She had almost cleared the woods when she stopped suddenly. The hills were crawling with ODSs and ONI agents! _What the hell? Howâ€|_ A rustling noise behind her was all the warning she had before a hand clamped around her mouth. She felt herself being pulled backwards, and struggled. The hand stayed over her mouth, while another hand wrapped itself around her waist, trying to pin her arms to her body.

"Stay still, we're on your side," a rough voice whispered in her ear. It sounded vaguely familiarâ€|

"How soon before ONI gets here?" a second voice asked. At the mention of ONI, Laura struggled even more, almost breaking free. The grip on her waist got tighter, and she felt like she could barely breathe.

"No idea, but we've got to get out of here, and soon," the first voice replied, the voice who'd tried to say it was on her side. A suspicion of who her captors were nagged at her mind, and she kicked out, trying to break free. _Of course they'd try to lie and gain my confidence_, she thought as she struggled even harder. No one had followed her, so obviously it had to be a coincidence that she'd gotten captured by ODSs on her own turf.

"She's still fighting," another voice whispered, this one more feminine than the other two. A shadow moved in front of her,

moonlight glistening off close-cropped red hair. _The Spartans!_ Laura realized she had no chance of escape, so she stopped fighting and nodded, trying to signal cooperation. The hand was removed from her mouth, and she turned to see the other three behind her. The Master Chief was closest, so she figured he'd been the one to catch her. Remembering ONI was on the loose, and having heard that the Spartans didn't want to be seen by the spooks, she moved off. _Better get moving, before ONI catches on. I'll pump them for info later._

"Follow me," she whispered, her voice barely carrying. She slipped away through the trees, looking back until she was sure the Spartans were following.

The Spartans had seen the entire base go on alert, and figured it had something to do with Blade. John and Will had immediately figured she'd be in the woods, and had set up a trap to intercept her before ONI could. It had worked well, but something had almost gone really wrong: when John had pulled her backwards, he'd suddenly gone weak-kneed, and come close to letting go of the elusive woman. It had been all he could do to keep his grip on her. _How had she done that? What happened?_ He figured he'd find a way to explain it later.

Blade suddenly stopped moving, and began feeling around a large granite boulder partially obscured by ivy. _Has she gone insane?_ The thought flickered through every mind until she released a hidden catch; the boulder swung upwards, attached to a hidden door. Blade motioned the Spartans inside, followed them in, and sealed the hatch.

"Lorienna, what happened?" Laura asked empty air as she led the Spartans down a narrow hallway.

"Someone saw you sneak out your window and reported in," the AI replied. "I didn't dare try splicing recordings after that, since that would have raised even more questions."

She stopped short in front of a large room. "You did the right thing. I probably would've done the same in your place. Still there'll probably be some awkward questions tomorrow." Laura sighed heavily, and opened the door. Inside was a large array of weapons, tools, and machinery in varied states of disrepair.

"Welcome to my workshop. I figured here would be the safest place we could talk. ONI has no idea what goes on down here, since they don't even know it exists." Crossing her arms in front of her, she stared at them, dark eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why did you come after me? What's your angle?"

"ONI sent the base on full alert once they found you were missing. There were Helljumpers waiting for you in the woods, on the hills, everywhere." Linda met the woman's suspicious gaze with a green-eyed glare of her own. "You're damn lucky we decided to get to you first."

"We'll see about that," Laura returned, narrowed eyes opening the tiniest bit. It was difficult to tell, but it seemed that she was a little less suspicious of their motives. "How did you find me in the first place?"

"Will and I had a guess as to where you'd be headed," the Chief muttered, voice harsh as usual. _Definitely some music in his voice_, Laura mused, then mentally smacked herself in the head. _What am I thinking?_

"Lucky guess." She smiled lightly, but there was still worry behind her eyes: worry, distrust, and confusion. For a brief moment, it seemed as though the redoubtable Blade was vulnerable, if given the right circumstances. The moment passed, however, leaving behind a formidable, if slightly suspicious, Spartan behind.

"Better wait for a few hours before you head back out. Lorienna can tell you when it's safe to exit. You'll be able to find your way back, I'm sure."

"Where the hell are we, anyway?" Fred demanded, having been silent the entire time. Laura raised an eyebrow at the angry voice.

"Why don't you ask Sergeant Johnson?" With that cryptic response, she exited the room. Fred opened the door, only to find shadows and seemingly empty hallways.

"That woman is starting to get on my nerves," he muttered angrily.

"You're just jealous because she kicked your ass over a month ago, literally," Linda replied, a hint of amusement in her quiet voice.

"So? Even you have to admit she's a pain in the ass about ninety percent of the time."

"Maybe, but she's a clever pain in the ass," John interjected. "I know I'd hate to be on her bad side, especially after having seen this bunker."

"If you only knew the half of it," Blade's voice echoed around. The sound startled the Spartans, until they saw the holographic figure of Lorienna nearby. She chuckled softly.

"It's safe for you to head topside at any point. Just head back the way you came, and I'll lock the door behind you."

The Chief stayed behind after his team had gone ahead. "What did you mean?"

"I meant that, while she may be a pain in the ass, Laura is sharper than she lets on. She was smart enough to appropriate this bunker, clever enough to make the passage you came through, and wise enough to only let you see this workshop."

"There's more to this place?" John asked in amazement.

"I didn't say a word," the AI winked as she vanished.

Realizing the conversation was over, the Chief headed back up the passage and rejoined his fellow Spartans.

"What took you so long" Will asked.

"I had a few questions for an AI."

Laura winced inwardly as she saw the officers approaching her bunkhouse. _This isn't going to be pretty._ She hoped Lorienna had spliced the recordings so they didn't see her leaving the workshop. _If they saw _that_ one, there'd definitely be hell to pay._

"The Spartans are gone," a soft whisper echoed in her ear.

"Good. You'd better go too," she replied.

The Spartans could have killed me, Laura mused, reminded of that fact by her AI's message. _Why didn't they? Could I really have been wrong?_ Loud banging on her door interrupted her musings. _I'll think about that later_. Squaring her shoulders, Laura walked to the door and the recriminations awaiting her on the other side.

15. Chapter 14: Deadly Blackmail

Finally ONI manages to get control of their 'problematic' operative. Can she get out of this one, or is she broken for good? Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Fourteen: Deadly Blackmail

****November 10, 2552 1128 hours****

****Morisson Residence****

****North America****

Angela Morisson was worried about her husband, Matthew. A lieutenant in the UNSC Navy, Matt was sharp when it came to formulating combat strategies, whether in the air or on the ground. He'd been gone for over a year without her even receiving a letter. She had a lot on her mind, between taking care of their twins and minding the house, and worrying about her husband and her sister-in-law. Just as she thought of Laura, the doorbell rang.

"Laura! I was just thinking about you. How have you been?"

"Hi, Angela. I've got a bit of a surprise for you and the Terrible Tickling Twins. Where are they at?"

"In the backyard, making a mess. I doubt I'll ever understand how four-year-olds can enjoy messy things."

"Well, we'd better get them cleaned up. They'll want to look nice today."

Half an hour later, Laura, Angela, and the twins Alex and Katrina were in a civilian car heading toward the hospital on base. Angela looked at her sharply but didn't say anything; she was afraid of what might happen, but a faint stirring of hope rose in her heart. When Laura pulled into the lot, she looked at the twins.

"I have a surprise for you two, but you'll have to behave yourselves,

okay?"

When they nodded, Laura let them out of the car. As they entered the hospital, a plainly dressed man spoke into a hidden mike.

"Blade's here, with the family."

****Adams Medical Facility, Fourth Floor****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

The fourth floor of the military hospital was strictly off-limits to civilians, but Laura ignored the regulations that day. Leading Angela and her children to a closed door, she knocked four times before opening the door. Angela almost fainted at the sight while the twins rushed forward.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

Matt Morisson lay wounded in a hospital bed, IV tubes snaking throughout his body, one arm in a cast, looking extremely tired, but he was alive. While he was awkwardly hugging his two children, Laura filled her sister-in-law in on the details.

"He was found in an escape craft, along with several other crew members. They were just brought in a few days ago. Matt has the worst injuries, but so far his prognosis is looking good. I thought it would be a good idea for you to see each other; it may help his recovery."

"It's not allowed, is it, our being here?"

"No, but right now I don't give a damn. He needs his family now, as much as you need him. I'll take care of everything. Now go in there and give your husband a warm welcome home!" She pushed Angela through the doorway and watched the enthusiastic homecoming, not caring what would happen later. She knew she was breaking several regulations, but also that she was doing the right thing. A slight noise behind her made her turn and glare at the men in ONI uniform who had arrived.

"Blade, you realize that you have committed a court-marshal offense by bringing civilians to this level."

"So what? I know I've done the right thing in reuniting my brother with his family. I also know that you can't court-marshal someone who doesn't exist, and therefore are helpless. Besides, this will help speed his recovery so he can get back to a normal life."

"You're right, Blade. We can't court-marshal you, but that doesn't mean we don't have leverage. Tell me, how much do those civilians mean to you?" The implication in his words hit home. They saw her visibly pale, the spark in her eyes beginning to die.

"You sadistic bastards!" she hissed angrily through clenched teeth. "How dare you involve them like this! They have nothing to do with your shadow business. Leave them be!"

"As long as you cooperate, they won't be hurt. But one false move on your part--" He didn't need to finish.

Matt had been watching the exchange from his bed. _What the hell is going on?_ True, Laura had broken every rule in the book, but ONI had never done anything like this before. Even though he couldn't hear the exchange, he could tell something was wrong. Watching Laura's proud figure wilting in defeat seemed to confirm his worst fears: ONI finally had a hold over his sister, one that had the potential to destroy her completely.

When his sister walked back into the room, Alex and Katrina wrapped themselves around her legs. Gently disentangling them, she handed them back to their parents.

"Laura, what's going on?"

"Heal quickly, Lieutenant. We still have a war to win."

"Laura, what are you saying? Dammit, I want an answer!" Dark eyes stared back at him; Matt had never seen them look so empty and bleak.

"Laura Morisson is dead, Lieutenant. My name is Blade."

As she walked out the door, her right hand moved behind her back, making subtle gestures—hand signals she'd learned and taught to her family, since ONI tried to keep her under constant surveillance. When Matt finally interpreted them, he understood: _Danger. ONI. Warn family._ He was disgusted at the cruelty of it all. _They've found leverage alright,_ he thought grimly. _They're using us as blackmail!_

****November 14, 2552 1200 hours****

****Morisson Residence****

****North America****

A few days later, Nicole Mitchell met with the Morisson family, and filled them in on the details. She had in her possession a file Lorient had stolen from ONI's database, and displayed its contents. Not only did Ackerson plan to use the Morisson family as blackmail, knowing full well that Laura would do anything to protect them, but he also noted that the stress of following his orders while trying to protect her family would eventually kill her. He pleasantly noted that Laura was already showing signs of breakdown.

"This is despicable, even for ONI!" Matt raged, "We've got to do something!"

Nicole, however upset she might be, still kept her head. "We can't do anything, not with a stolen file. They'd only charge us with treason. Still, there's got to be something we can do."

"What about General West?" Dr. Gedeon pointed out. While she could see ONI wanting to erase Laura's existence, part of her still refused to believe Ackerson was behind it; it was easier to believe someone in ONI wanted to frame the officer than admit an officer might be behind this. "He has a lot of contacts in the right places, and he's

always had a lot of respect for Laura. He might know what to do."

"Been there already. He's looking into it as we speak, but there's no guarantee he'll find anything. ONI has developed a tendency lately to over-encrypt their important files. The only reason I have this is because we knew what to look forâ€"a gaping hole in their encryptions where multiple codes cancel each other out. Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do at this point but wait."

_Nothing you can do, Miss Mitchell, but I can do something, _Lorienna thought as she listened in on the worried conversationsâ€"when Laura had built her, she'd given Lorienna special 'access nodes' in her family's homes and her friend's home, in case Lorienna ever needed to pass her an important file or message quickly. _And I will do everything I can to save Laura and her family._ She broadcast a coded signal, hoping the recipient would hurry to respond: Lorienna feared that there wasn't much time left before the end came, whatever it may be. The signal pinged, and Lorienna opened a secure link with the AI Cortana. In a sense, a secure link between two AI's was like having them both standing in a digital 'room': they could see each other's appearances and converse eye-to-eye. Lorienna spoke first, her voice laced with hesitation and concern.

"There's a problem that I need your assistance on, with regards to my creator."

"You mean Blade?" Cortana sounded amused. "I thought she needed no help, and neither did you."

Lorienna winced visibly, knowing exactly how that kind of impression must have been formed. Laura was immensely proud, and too stubborn to ask for help; Lorienna herself had the same mindset. _She must have seen that last incident with the Helljumpers during her workout._ "Normally we don't, but this time we have a shared problem: a mutual enemy, one who has a hold over my creator that could end in her deletion. I cannot assist her alone, any more than her family can. You, and possibly the Spartans, are the only ones who can help us now." Lorienna briefly filled Cortana in on the details of Ackerson's scheme. Actually, she was able to tell Cortana everything, but it only took a fraction of the time it would take if they had been two humans conversing.

"How does he really expect this to work? Spartans don't give in to despair."

"Cortana, you don't know Laura as I do. She and I are of like minds--she used her own personality to create me, so I know her mind better than she does herself. What would kill her wouldn't be despair, but desperation."

"What do you mean?" Curiosity edged into Cortana's voice.

"Laura draws her strength not from a desire to succeed, not from ambition, nor entirely from her training: she draws it from compassion. She cares deeply about the people she trusts and loves them wholeheartedly. Put them in any danger and she will do anything to protect them. By threatening to hurt her family unless she obeys him, Ackerson has finally established a hold over her, and Laura will be so afraid of making a mistake that she may try to prevent herself

from making any mistakes, in the only way she sees as possible. She will kill herself if she believes it will save her family and friends. If you were in her position, what would you do?"

Cortana couldn't answer; she partly understood now why Laura hated Ackerson so much. In Laura's files, which Lorienna had so graciously provided for her to view, she had noted an exceeding lack of respect whenever ONI tried to control her or give her an assignment. Ackerson's private logs reflected the mutual lack of respect, but Cortana never thought he'd try to drive someone into self-destruction: it simply wasn't his style.

Lorienna understood what her counterpart was thinking by the look on her 'face' and nodded. "He's tried to use more conventional means, but Laura keeps one step ahead of him, and that annoys him wholeheartedly." Her own face became troubled. "There's something else, though, an anomaly that I have yet to explain logically. Lately Laura's been retrieving data on the Spartans, as much as she can find: specifically, on SPARTAN-117 in particular. Maybe she's just trying to pull information for the mission she's planning, but I doubt it. If I didn't know better, I'd say she'd developed an interest in him, and possibly an affection for him."

"Really? That is unusual. But what do you want me to do?"

"You know better than I do about methods of dealing with ONI, as well as the regular brass. As far as Laura and SPARTAN-117, just keep your ears open. If ONI ever finds out or suspects Laura loves or cares about someone dearly, they will not hesitate to use that someone as leverage, whether their suspicions are confirmed or not--look what they've done here. Her family has been threatened, but they're aware of itâ€"Nicole Mitchell had me pull the file and showed it to them. But there's nothing they can do, and I can't do much more than wreak havoc in their database, which would only make them angry and possibly attack the family, and kill my creator in the process."

"Don't worry about a thing, Lorienna. I'll think of something." Cortana paused and looked hard at the other AI. "Tell me one thing: how did she know we'd arrived on Earth?"

"We hacked into the database and found out you were inbound. Laura noticed Ackerson would be there and decided to keep an eye on him, plus she needed to see for herself how he'd treat them. She was most upset when they received a heroes' welcome while she was unacknowledged by humanity. As far as the world is concerned, Laura Elizabeth Morisson never existed, even though she's done her duty and more in the efforts to save humanity. Although, I must admit she found a unique way to get her point across." A brief smile touched her face, but faded as Lorienna shook her dark 'hair' out of her face. "Poor child. She's alone, and she always will be."

Not if I can do anything to stop it, Cortana thought. Relaying this conversation to General West, she made plans to inform one of the Spartans of the new problem, in hopes of establishing a sort of trust between Laura and the others. Linda would probably be best, since both are women, and both strong alone. Perhaps she can bring Laura to the group. No Spartan should be forced to stand alone.

****November 15, 2552 0830 hours****

****Camp Hayes****

Linda woke up the next morning to find a transmission from Cortana. It was unusual enough for her to receive it, but the wording puzzled her even more: Ask Nicole Mitchell about Blade. Deciding not to inform the others just yet, she went directly to Miss Mitchell as soon as she could.

"What's going on?" she asked, explaining the message. When she was done, Nicole paled.

"I don't know how Cortana found out, or what she's up to, but she was right. Laura's in trouble, and we can't help her." Pausing for a moment, she looked at the Spartan in front of her.

"You'd better get your friends. I think you all need to know what's going on."

16. Chapter 15: Secret Files, Secret Allies

Continuation of chapter 14. I'd say more, but why spoil it?

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Fifteen: Secret Files, Secret Allies

****November 15, 2552 0930 hours****

****Mitchell Residence****

****North America****

Nicole had asked the Spartans to come to her home; she had something she wanted them to see. Making sure Skeeter was outside for the duration of their visit, she led the Spartans through her home to a computer terminal, an unusually sophisticated one for a civilian home. Entering voice codes and passwords, she was able to access Laura's private database.

"No AI?" Will asked.

"Lorienna disappeared a few days ago, for reasons unknown. I don't think she was erased, but she's not online at the moment. I can't see that Laura would hinder herself like that; Lorienna is one of her most valuable assets. Something's wrong; Lorienna doesn't disappear without a reason."

The files displayed on the screen were numerous, and had unusual names: Angerthas Cirth, Silver Pond, Blade's Blood, and others just as strange. Nicole opened one titled Shrieking Eagles; the terminal displayed a large amount of runic text and four pictures in a curious grouping: a wolf, a bald eagle, and a horse were grouped in a triangle around a picture of Laura, the same picture they had seen in Dr. Gedeon's photo album. Nicole entered a series of commands on the keyboard.

"I'm decoding the file. This is her personal journal, and there's some things here I think you should see."

Within minutes the text shifted from runes to plain English. The first two paragraphs were plain four-line verses, which stood out from the rest:

Shrieking eagles, here I lie
Lost and alone beneath the sky,
Endlessly pursued by fears
Haunting me throughout the years.
Shrieking eagles, here I lie,
Looking deathlike to your eye.
Though I cry out, no one hears,
Only you can see my tears.

"She wrote those verses herself," Nicole murmured. "It's only half of the whole thing." Taking a breath, she recited:

Shrieking eagles, hear my voice,
I no longer have a choice.
No one else has ever cared.
My fate at last has been declared.
Shrieking eagles, here I stand,
Alone at last upon this land.
Alone at last, as from the first,
None now shall know my lifelong thirst.

The first journal entry was dated May 14, 2523:

Since this will no doubt be my only private record of my life, I begin this recording at the ripe old age of twelve. My name is Laura Elizabeth Morisson, and I am a soldier in the United Nations Space Command. When I was four years old I was conscripted into a special project, designed specifically to create a series of super-soldiers. The SPARTAN-II Project started with me, and for many years I thought I was the only one. I trained almost nonstop in order to become the ultimate killing machine, and only left Camp Hayes to visit family every other week; my trainers and instructors wouldn't allow more visits. Just recently, my mother and I were visiting the planet Reach, and it was there I found out the truth, parts of it at any rate. I saw others like me, at least seventy of them, boys and girls, all deadly like me. As soon as we returned to Earth, I hacked into ONI's database and began to pull out the truth: I was nothing more than the test case for the SPARTAN project. ONI used me as little more than a human guinea pig! I'm going to find out everything I can, and will continue to do so and keep one step ahead of ONI: they're not going to deceive me again!

Nicole scrolled past several pages' worth of writings until she came to one entry in particular. The date was the same day Laura had bested Fred in close combat.

'It's official, ladies and germs: Ackerson wants to kill me off. He sent "his" Spartans after me during my workout to take me out. Thank goodness the guy didn't know jujitsu, or I'd have been in trouble. It was that close. And Ackerson was standing there watching the whole thing, waiting for the Spartan to kill me, the bastard!'_

Nicole scrolled down even further, stopping at a fairly recent entry dated shortly after capturing a Covenant freighter:

'Matt's been home for a couple of days recuperating. I took his family up to see him, knowing it was illegal but the right thing to do. ONI was waiting for me, with blackmail I can't get out of: if I don't cooperate, they'll hurt everyone I care about. I can't let that happen, and I hate the thought of caving in to Ackerson, but I have no choice. The only way out is death, but that would be the worst course of action. Stuck in another Catch-22, I have no one to turn to, nowhere to run, and I can't fight back. Even though I know better than to just give up, somehow I can't help but feel all is lost. It seems like the endgame, the final stroke of midnight.'

Here, for the first time, the Spartans learned that Laura could feel despair. Nicole turned and looked at them, something in her eyes that suggested a similar despair, and a dark fear.

"This happened about a week ago. Lorienna hacked into ONI's database at my request and found Ackerson's files on the matter. He's trying to get her to burn out and kill herself. If he's not exposed, I don't know what might happen. In a few more days he might succeed. The pressure to obey orders conflicting with her trying to do the right thing is killing her. Her family and I can't help her, and I don't know what to do."

"And you think we do?" Fred asked, his tone less acerbic than on previous occasions, indicating that even he was disgusted by this information.

"I thought you might be able to find a solution. Maybe, since you're Spartans, you can get through to the officers and tell them what's going on. I know you don't question orders, but some orders need to be disobeyed because they're wrong. If Ackerson's given you orders regarding Laura, then they need to be discarded: all he wants is a dead Blade. He forgets that she's still human, and that there are people who will ask questions if something happens to her: one of them is even a prominent colonel."

"Why do you care so much about her?" John asked, his curiosity mounting. "Why does a civilian go out of her way for a Spartan?"

Nicole fixed him with a dark look. "I care because Laura is the only real friend I have. She saved my life when I almost died of shame in high school. I had cancer, and the chemo stopped it, but it left me bald. The kids at my high school bullied me relentlessly, and I was close to suicide when Laura came along. She told me how to fight the bullies with words, and more. She actually shaved her head to give

the bullies a new target, and gave me all her beautiful long hair to make a wig for myself. And when we graduated and I found out the truth, she tried to keep me from danger, and has ever since. Laura is the truest friend anyone could ask for, and a much better friend than anyone deserves. To see her helpless in ONI's hands is disgusting to me and to her family. If there was anything we could do to help her now, rest assured we would!"

"I just wondered. You see, most people wouldn't go out of their way to help anyone the way you're trying to help Blade."

"Her name is Laura." Nicole's eyes flashed angrily. "You still haven't figured out that ONI and the rest of the Marines use her codename as an insult?"

"Miss Mitchell, we're not exactly Marines or ONI, we just don't know that much about your friend. And she's not exactly willing to let us get to know her," Linda reasoned with the woman. Nicole sighed, reigning in her temper; she was just so worried about Laura that she'd snapped at the Spartans without meaning to.

"No, she wouldn't be, all because of ONI. You see why now, why she hates them so much, and why she hates and distrusts you. It's not you as people, it's you as ONI operatives. She's afraid of the orders you may have been given."

"Orders?" Will asked.

"Orders. Ackerson wants her dead, and she's afraid he'll order you to kill her on her next mission." Nicole smiled grimly at their confusion. "We have no secrets, Laura and I, since I know when to keep my mouth shut. Although," her eyes sparkled mischievously, "there are times when it's best to tell others and enlist their assistance, if you know they can be trusted."

****November 16, 2552 1024 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

Laura was sitting in the 'living room' of her bunkhouse, working on her plan for capturing a Covenant cruiser, when she heard a knocking on her door. _Who could that be? If it's ONI_ she banished the fear from her mind and moved to the door. Thankful for the chain-bolt she'd put in for safety's sake, she opened the door a crack to see General West standing outside.

"Laura, we need to talk."

"Laura Morisson is dead, sir." Her dark eyes dropped down to the floor. "I'm Blade now, I have to be."

"No you aren't, and you know it," West replied. "I order you to open this door."

Visibly wilting, Laura shut the door long enough to undo the chain, and opened the door enough to let him in. West noticed the strict military adherence in the once-comfortable bunkhouse. _ONI must have hammered it home,_ he thought sadly, shaking his head at the bare

walls and strict furnishings. The report the Spartans had brought, as well as the files Nicole Mitchell had sent him (though how a civilian had gotten her hands on classified data was beyond him), had spurred him into action; now that he'd seen it for himself, West was determined to put a stop to ONI's sadistic blackmail.

"You know, I think I liked your last decorating scheme better, Laura."

"I don't have a choice, sir. ONI wasn't about to let that slide," she said with more than a hint of bitterness.

"Yes, I can see." West forced himself to sit on one of the rigid chairs. "What exactly did they tell you, Laura?"

"You don't want to know, sir. Trust me."

"Laura, when the Spartans are coming to me with concerns about your 'mental state,' as they put it, something's not right."

"The Spartans? What would they care? They've got no reason to be concerned." _For that matter, they have no reason to be worried. So why are they?_

"They obviously cared enough to tell me something was wrong. Maybe they're just worried about the upcoming mission, maybe they're genuinely concerned about a fellow Spartan. I don't really know, and frankly, I don't really care what their motivation is at this point. What I do care about is what's happening to the best soldier on this base. Now, would you care to tell me voluntarily, or do I have to order you to speak with a psychiatrist?" _As if I'd even consider doing that_, West scowled. _Maybe it'll help her tell me what's going on, as long as she doesn't call my bluff._ He hoped the empty threat sounded convincing enough.

Laura saw he wasn't about to go away, so she broke down and told him everything.

****November 16, 2552 1024 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

Two days later, she received a note from the general:

_ 'I've had a few words with a few ONI officers a little higher up than Ackerson. They've had a few words with him, and are going back to the status quo. Just be careful, Lieutenant' Ackerson's not too happy at the moment. '_

Laura smiled lightly when she saw the reference to her 'unofficial' rank; West had been the one to issue the recommendation for her promotion, and had been very upset when it was ignored. As a result, he referred to her as Lieutenant Morisson in private files and the occasional letter. Still smiling, she put the letter down and got in touch with her family for the first time in weeks.

Cortana never enjoyed being kept in the dark; as a highly sophisticated hacker, she tried to know whatever she could.

Challenges amused her, and in this case there was a most scintillating puzzle to be solved: Blade's mission records. One in particular caught her eye, if only because of the amount of counter-intrusion codes. She pinged the file, looking for a way in. A conversation with Lorienna some time ago came to mind. _If you're faced with a lot of counter-codes, it's not always a good idea to take them head on: too many traces get left behind that way. Rather, try looking for a more subtle way in: back doors they forgot to encrypt, weaker barriers, holes in the barriers where codes cancel each other out. Lately, I've seen more cancellations than anything else, which makes me wonder about their carelessness: why after all these years? Are they just being careless, or are they so paranoid that they're overencrypting?_ Cortana had no answers, but the conversation pointed her in a new direction: rather than break in through the front, find a back door; if there's no back door, find a window. Pinging the barriers, she noticed an anomaly: a minute hole in the counter-intrusion software. She sent a signal through, and slipped into the file. It was a mission record, all right, one where Ackerson had purposely set her up to fail.

Laura had nearly accomplished her mission, and was in the process of loading the captured base plans onto a small data pad, when she heard faint movements. Her head moved rapidly back and forth, trying to locate the noise. For a Spartan, she was unusually nervous; there was a large amount of reconnaissance data missing for this mission, and she had no idea what kind of resistance to potentially expect. A clicking noise behind her made her whirl in surprise, until she saw the rifle barrel aimed at her head.

"Well, well, is this ONI's best?" a sneering voice drawled behind her captors. "I expected better."

"Just try shooting me, punk, and I'll show you exactly what I'm capable of," Laura hissed, mentally running through all possibilities. She hadn't made a lot of noise with her entry or exit, any bodies she'd had to make she'd hidden, so all that was left was that they'd been waiting for her.

"Perhaps. So you are Blade. Quite disappointing, really. I expected someone like the famous Blue Team to arrive."

"Oh really?" Laura drawled, checking her surroundings for other potential threats. She moved quickly, taking out one guard, using his rifle to nail the others, and grabbing the Rebel officer by the back of the neck.

"Now, you're going to do exactly as I say, or I'll blow your brains out the back of your skull. Clear?"

"Do I have much of a choice?" the officer gulped in fear; this wasn't at all what he'd expected.

"Good, because you're going to be my ticket out of here. We're going to walk out to the landing field, and you're going to tell your men to stand down, and we're going to go for a little drive through space. Now move." She retrieved her data pad and they headed towards the airfield.

_The next day, Laura was called in to discuss her mission. While she had not retrieved the file ONI had requested (which she found out

afterwards was because Ackerson had purposely given her the wrong objective), she had made up for it by abducting a key Rebel officer. She was given both a pat on the back and a warning against future mistakes, and allowed to leave. It was only afterwards, as she noted in the mission report, that she remembered how the Rebel officer had all but said he'd been waiting for her. How could he have known?_

Cortana finished viewing the file and shook her holographic head. Ackerson clearly had set her up for failure, by allowing her name to be leaked to the rebels. Checking her files one more time, she confirmed that this was the only time Blade had failed a mission. _She must have taken that really hard,_ Cortana thought. She managed to confirm that when she viewed a video surveillance tape of the firing range, recorded immediately after that particular mission: Blade was peppering a target as though her life depended on it. This was no ordinary target, however; this particular target had a picture of Ackerson taped to the top, and it was this Blade was shooting at so furiously, always aiming at the head. By the time she was done, the target was pretty much a mass of bullet holes.

Hmm, shooting Ackerson in effigy, she thought. _Nice touch._

17. Chapter 16: Mitchell Memories

A flashback from Nicole's POV, starting when she first met Laura. Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Seventeen: Mitchell Memories

****November 18, 2552 1600 hours****

****Mitchell Residence****

****North America****

Nicole stood looking out the window at the snow falling on the grass, smiling as Laura wrestled with Skeeter in the powdery whiteness. It was still too early for snow, but the weather forecast only called for a few flurries, which would melt as soon as the sun came out. Remembering how she'd met Laura the first time, and remembering how she'd forced the truth out of her a few years later, she wondered if there was any way to make up for what ONI had done.

****September 4, 2527****

****Ross High School****

****North America****

The young girl hid in the restroom stall, crying bitterly. The other students teased her mercilessly, even though they were high school students. _Why can't they just leave me alone? Can I help it if I have cancer?_ Hearing the bathroom door open, she feared the worst: more bullying. The footsteps stopped in front of her stall, but the voice that followed was not what she'd expected: it was gentle, musical, and friendly.

"Are you alright? Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Please, just go away and leave me alone," she sobbed, nearly choking on the words.

"I can't do that," the kindly voice replied. "You're upset, and you need someone to talk to, or to vent your frustrations on if nothing else."

A hand gripped the top edge of the door and pulled it open. The girl recognized the face of the girl on the other side: she'd just transferred in from out-of-state. Her dark brown hair curled a little around her face, and her dark eyes sparkled with mischief and intelligence behind a pair of silver glasses. She looked really strong, and was about six or seven feet tall, but her smile was kind.

"You're in band, aren't you? Horn player?" When she nodded, the dark-haired girl continued, "Band starts up in about two minutes, and you know how Lewis gets when people walk in late. Come on, we're playing some fun stuff today."

"I really don't want to go."

"I can appreciate it." She smiled a little at the shocked look on the other girl's face. "I know how it feels to be bullied for no reason, believe it or not. They still bully me here, just because I'm different, even though it's not my fault I'm new here—any more than it's your fault you have cancer. The trick is to remind yourself that you're smarter than they'll ever hope to be, because in the long run you are. Book smarts are all well and good, but compassion—that you can't learn from any book, and that's what makes you smarter than them."

"I never really thought of it that way before."

"Well, then why don't you? Didn't any of your friends tell you that?"

"I don't really have any friends. Once I got cancer, they all disappeared, especially after the treatments started." She sighed and touched the thinning strands of blonde hair that hung limply around her head.

"Well, you have one now. I'm Laura Morisson."

"Nicole Mitchell."

"Nice to meet you, Nicole, and don't worry—things will look up. I promise."

The next day, Nicole walked in and was promptly surrounded by the bullies from yesterday. They were starting to poke fun at her thin hair when a clear voice rang out in the hallway.

"Hey, why don't you pick on somebody more your size?" It was Laura, the girl who'd offered her friendship yesterday, but Nicole almost didn't recognize her: she'd shaved off all her long brown hair! The girl's bald head sent the bullies into shock, but one found his voice.

"So, the odd woman out decided to stick up for Baldy, has she?"

"Shove it, meathead. At least I'm doing the right thing. Why do you pick on someone who's better than you?"

"At least I'm not bald," one of them said.

"No, but you lack kindness and understanding. Tell me, have you ever seen someone truly suffer? Have you ever suffered from illness or pain and had no one to help you along? Have you ever been abandoned by people you thought you could trust because of something you have no control over? Have you ever in your entire life known what it feels like to be really and truly alone?" None of them answered. "Then next time you think of bullying someone who seems different, think of that." With that parting shot, Laura led Nicole away.

"Told you things would get better," she said with a small smile.

"Your hairâ€" " Nicole began.

"Is waiting to be made into a wig for you, if you wish. Or it will go to another cancer patient in need. Fear not, my hair will grow back, longer and thicker than it was before I cut it all off." She smiled, and for the first time in many years Nicole felt happy.

****May 25, 2529****

****Mitchell Residence****

****North America****

For three years, Nicole and Laura were the best and truest of friends. Nicole's parents even approved of her new friend, especially when she'd offered her own hair for Nicole. They spent a lot of time together, but Nicole was worried by a number of mysteries surrounding her new friend. One was the way she took the insults, beatings, and bullying hurled at her from almost every direction: she acted like it didn't matter, which most people never did. Another thing was how tall and broad her friend seemed, she looked like she could play football and win. Then there was her extremely adult way of talking, which stood in sharp contrast to the fact that she struggled with her grades. One afternoon, shortly after graduation, these mysteries suddenly came into sharper focus when Nicole's older brother Nathan, home on leave from military training, opened the newspaper.

"Nicole, have you heard anything from Laura recently?"

"No. Why?"

"Because according to the obituaries, she's been dead for a couple days. There's mention of a private ceremony, her ashes were cremated and scattered along the Sandusky River, near her house."

"That's impossible! Her parents would have told me if that were true!" jumping to a communications screen, Nicole dialed her friend's home and got her mother on the line.

"Mrs. Morisson, is Laura okay? I just saw in the papersâ€" "

"I'm sorry, Nicole. Laura's dead. I'm sorry we didn't tell you before, but Pete wanted a private ceremony before he was shipped out." Laura's father was a Navy officer.

"Mrs. Morisson, I can't believe it. I never would have thought Laura would die. What happened?"

Laura's mom looked bothered for a moment.

"Laura had cancer," she said at last. "We didn't realize it until it was too late. I'm sorry, Nicole. You were her best friend, and her only real friend." The viewscreen blinked off, but not before Nicole noticed the woman's eyes were empty of tears, unusual in a parent whose child had just died. In fact, she seemed more worried than sad.

"Nathe, something's not right. I'm heading over there."

"Mind if I tag along? Mrs. Morisson's hiding something, that much I noticed, and I want to know what."

They both headed over, and arrived just in time to see Laura's mom head out of the door in a white lab coat and hightail it into the backyard, where a young woman in a workout suit was doing stretches. Nicole's breath caught in her throat. _Laura's alive! But what's going on?_ Nathan kept driving and parked the car a few blocks away, then they snuck back to see what was going on, and why Laura's mom had lied to them.

As they watched, Laura went into a series of karate moves, apparently working out in her own backyard; at one point, Nicole noticed the absence of the silver glasses Laura always wore. Since it was early evening, it was dark enough to conceal the two siblings as they watched Laura spin, apparently having done this for years. _She could have fought back and injured the kids that beat her up! Why didn't she?_ Nicole wondered. Right as she finished thinking this, Laura stopped and looked right at them, even though it had gotten too dark to see.

"Nicole! Nathan! What are you doing here? How much did you see?" Laura almost sounded scared, which struck them both as odd.

"Laura, what is going on? First we see in the paper that you're dead, then your mom says you had cancer, and now you're suddenly alive and a black belt? What's going on here?"

"Damn!" Laura swore. "Nick, Nathe, you shouldn't be here. If they find outâ€"it may be already too late. Just get out of here, and don't come back. Don't ever come looking for me, do you understand? Dammit, just go!"

"Not until you tell us what's going on. Nathe and I aren't leaving here until you doâ€"you owe us that much."

Laura suddenly got really quiet, and Nicole could almost see the worry and concentration on her friend's face. "Come inside, but be quiet. Let me go first, and I'll tell you when it's safe." After a

few minutes, Laura called them inside. She sat them down in chairs in the living room and began to tell them everything.

"You realize you've put all of us in a dangerous position: my family, your family, and yourselves not the least. I know I owe you an explanation, but I'm going to be breaking a lot of rules just by telling you all this. Everything you're going to hear is classified under the highest levels of the UNSC Office of Naval Intelligence, and if you tell anyone, all of us could die.

"When I was four years old, the spooks at ONI decided they needed a 'test case' for one of their special warfare projects. They ran a genetics study and figured I was the perfect candidate. Mom and Dad volunteered me for active duty, on the condition that I be allowed to visit them once in a while. I've been training as a soldier ever since then, and once I hit twelve I was as lethal as any Marine, and as stealthy as any of their SpecOps troopers.

"At the time they told me I was the only one in the project, but then ONI made the mistake of sending me to Reach to observe my interactions with the other 75 trainees in the program. Once I got back, I did some hacking and found out the truth. There's been conflicts with them ever since, but they don't know how much I know, and I'm trying to keep it that way. Once I turned fourteen, theyâ€¦|did things to me: experimental procedures designed to make me faster, stronger, smarter, and more durable. I barely survived, so they thought the kids on Reach had better odds. Thirty of them didn't make it, and twelve were permanently incapacitated. I don't know about the rest."

"What did they do to you?" Nicole asked, her tone unusually quiet.

"You don't want to know, trust me."

"There's one thing I don't understand, well actually there's a lot I still don't understand," Nathan voiced. "For one thing, how did you convince them to let you come here for three years? And why the bogus obituary?"

"Once I was conscripted for the program, ONI eliminated all traces of meâ€"according to public records, I died of pneumonia at age four. I still came back to visit, but no one could ever get close to me except my familyâ€"and sometimes not even them, because of my training. No matter where I was or what company I was in, I was always alone, and after awhile it started to wear me down. After pointing this out to the brass, I was able to convince them to let me attend high school; we had to do a lot of fact-fudging to make me seem normal, and we forged a transcript and transfer notice to silence suspicions. I even made myself a pair of glasses to look more normalâ€"plain window glass was all it was. After years of being trained for intelligence and combat, it was a challenge to try and blend in."

"You seemed to do fairly well at it," Nicole commented dryly. A lot of things were beginning to make sense now, but Laura's story was still creepy in the highest degree. Laura saw the look on her face and understood.

"I know, it's a lot to absorb in such a short time; be glad I'm just

giving you the bare basics. Anyway, once I got into high school, I realized I'd have to dumb myself down a lot, and not fight back when I was being bullied. As hard as it was for me to stand and take the beatings without swinging back, it was even harder to act dumber than I was academically. It felt so wrong that I started doing two sets of each assignment: one perfectly correct and one to turn in to the teacher. At first, I enjoyed the whole idea of fooling everyone in the school, but after I met you, I did it more so that I could fit in, so I could be the friend you deserved for a little while."

Laura's dark eyes filled with tears, something Nicole had never seen in all the years at school. "Every time you talked about going away to college, I wanted to tell you the truth. The fake death notice was so I could disappear and return to 'active' duty without any awkward questions being raised. I wanted you to know the truth so many times, but telling you would have signed your death warrants. If ONI ever finds out that outsiders know about me, or any others like me, they'd see to it that those people disappeared. I didn't want you to die on my account."

"We're not going to die," Nathan spoke sharply. "Nicole and I have too many people who would ask questions, and I just enlisted with the Marine Corps. Any disappearances from us would raise a lot of questions."

"Still, don't talk about this to anyone, and watch what you say in your house. ONI keeps bugging ours, which is why I made you wait while I disabled them. There's a chance your place might be bugged as well. Be careful, and watch the shadows."

****November 18, 2552 1615 hours****

****Mitchell Residence****

****North America****

Nicole was still looking out the window when Laura came back in with Skeeter; she was quiet enough, but the little corgi was making more than enough noise for both of them, between barking and running around on the floor. Laughing at the amount of racket, Nicole wandered into the living room, where Laura was seated on the floor near a sofa.

"I would have thought he'd wear himself out playing in the snow," she laughed as Laura threw a ball for him to chase after.

"You of all people should know how hyper corgis can be," Laura replied, melodic laughter lacing her voice. "And Skeeter is one very energetic little guy." At that moment, Skeeter jumped up and started licking her face furiously, causing her to laugh even more than she already was.

"Okay, Skeeter-butt, down! Down!"

Skeeter finally wore himself out, after about ten more minutes of hyperactivity. When he went to lie down under one of the tables, Nicole looked at Laura.

"You never did tell me what they did to you, the procedures they used."

"As I said, you wouldn't have wanted to know. Although I suppose by now you deserve to." A blank stare came in her eyes as she recalled the files she's read.

"I was transported to a space station for the procedure, since the end result would require a ton of microgravity therapy. Once I was up there, ONI doctors grafted armor-type material on my skeleton, used special injections to increase my muscle density, boosted my thyroid output to make me larger and stronger, increased the blood flow to my eyes so I could see farther and clearer, and did something to my brain to increase my memory and reflexes. I don't really remember the operation itself, but the resultsâ€" she trailed off. After a while she continued:

"I'd wake up in the morning and my eyes would bleed a bit, plus I could barely walk. Most of the time I'd walk a few steps and land on my ass. Everything in my body hurt, especially in my bonesâ€"it felt like someone had put shards of glass inside my skeleton. When I wasn't doing microgravity therapy or learning how to use standard military equipment, I was being injected with proteins and having to eat five meals a day. All my coordination was gone, and it took a long time to get it back. By the time I did, though, I was faster and stronger than the simulations had predicted. I can lift three times my own weight, move at close to 60kph, and see in the dark. I can also hear just about anything, and my memory is even longer than they had hoped. ONI got what they wanted: an intelligent killing machine. What they didn't expect was that their killing machine on Earth would have a conscience, and a heart. I'm everything they wanted, and at the same time I'm everything they didn't want."

"They did all that to you?" Nicole whispered.

"Yes, they did, and they did it to the others too. A lot of the Spartans on Reach didn't even make it, but since I barely survived with my 'flawed' training, the bastards figured they'd have a much better chance of survival. For them, the risks were acceptable." She frowned. "And since their 'superior' killing machines have been racking up successes, they've buried me here except for the occasional suicidal black op. I've become a useless weapon, so they'll try to throw me out. What they didn't count on was my keeping one step ahead of them."

"And there's nothing we can do to expose them? No way to tell the world the truth?"

"Not without committing treasonable offenses and getting innocent people killed, no. I have to deal with this on my own."

"No you don't, Laura. You've got your mom, Lorienna, your dad and your brothers--whenever they get back, and you've got Nathe and me." Laura smiled at that, unaware that Lorienna and Cortana were listening in, unaware that Cortana was already making plans to give her four more people to rely on. _The first step is to connect her to the Spartans, and it seems Linda is fitting the bill perfectly. Maybe there's hope yet._

18. Chapter 17: Guilty Confessions

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat evolved or from any of

the books.

Chapter Seventeen: Guilty Confessions

****November 19, 2552 0830 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Laura woke with a start; she'd had another of her strange dreams. They were becoming more frequent of late, and she didn't know why. Frowning, she tried to recall the dream; it had been a test of some sortâ€¦

Every soldier on HALO-04 was assembled in the large amphitheater, waiting for a weapons demonstration to begin. Among them was the famed 'Floodwall Platoon,' a group of warriors whose record against the Flood was outstanding. Their captain, a human named Corin, and his second in command, the human Marin, waited in anticipation to see the new weapon the science guild had crafted.

"I wonder what it will be," Corin muttered. "The Flood seem to die quickly enough with out current weaponry."

"No, sir," Marin broke in. "I have a friendâ€¦in the science guild who showed me the current kill rates with our weapons in comparison to whatever the scientists cooked up: this thing, whatever it is, can kill a Flood form in mere seconds. And from what she said, they still have more refinements to make that could improve rate of fire and other things to bring them down faster."

"Well, then, I eagerly await the demonstration."

A scientist walked out on the platform at the front of the amphitheater, and a dead silence fell. She held an unusual device in her hands, which she seemed barely able to carry. Setting it down on a table nearby, she turned to the assembled soldiers.

"Welcome, fine warriors. You have all done much to turn back and defeat the Flood. Now we give you a new advantage to help turn the tide." She moved to a control panel, dimmed the lights, and activated a holographic display of the device she had been holding.

"Our studies of the Flood show that, while they have strong thresholds for heat and cold, they cannot withstand focused temperature extremes. We have also noted increasing instances of Flood combat forms regenerating after being wounded numerous times. Based on battlefield reports, this occurs less with the plasma energy weapons than with others; we theorize that this is due to the high temperatures that is characteristic of plasma in general.

"The Sentinel beam was originally designed for use on our security drones, with a beam capable only of stopping a target with minor injury. We have since modified it for use in combat scenarios, especially against the Flood." The woman depressed a control, and a schematic of the weapon replaced its holographic image. "It fires a focused beam of energy with an approximate temperature of 5,000

standard degrees, and is difficult for non-shielded targets to withstand. As yet, we have only a small fusion cell available to recharge the weapon, but are in the process of developing a better power source. However, the weapon itself is quite effective.

"With the High Council's approval, I have arranged for a small demonstration of the Sentinel beam's capabilities. If you would be so kind as to stand back, we can begin."

The soldiers cleared away from the platform; the scientist hefted the Sentinel beam, nodded, and assumed a firing stance as a containment cage was lowered. Inside the cage, a Flood combat form was thrashing in a vain attempt to escape. She nodded again and the cage was opened.

The Flood form came bursting out, leaping straight for the young woman in front of it. Corin noticed his second-in-command tensed, as the Flood hurled itself at the woman. Not even hesitating for a second, she raised the weapon and fired.

A beam of orange light shot from the weapon and speared the creature, giving off a large amount of heat and causing the room to stink of charred meat. The Flood form staggered back, and the scientist fired a second time, moving it up and down like a scalpel. In a matter of seconds the combat form had been reduced to a pile of blackened flesh. The woman lowered the weapon and turned back to the assembled soldiers.

"As I said, a highly effective weapon against the Flood. The Sentinel beam will be made available to you for combat use in a few days. I trust you will use it to great effect." She turned and walked off of the platform, and the soldiers filed out, impressed by the new weapon.

Alaya was on her way back to the laboratory when Corin and Marin caught up with her.

"Marin, what a pleasant surprise! I trust you enjoyed seeing the new beam weapon?"

"A nice improvement from the standard ballistics we use most of the time. I have to wonder, though, how you managed to convince the Council to allow a Flood form as a test subject."

"By promising them that there would be containment fields in place to contain the Flood form if things got bad. They were turned on the moment the cage came down, and I was more than prepared to burn it down." She turned and discreetly studied the other man nearby. _Must be Marin's commanding officer._ "Once I finish working on the modifications, the rate of fire and weapon effectiveness will be greatly improved."

"I look forward to testing the new weapon myself," Corin said quietly, finding himself disliking the scientist's blustery ways and apparent lack of concern.

"Captain, I don't think you've met Alaya. Alaya, this is Captain Corin, my platoon leader. Alaya's been a family friend ever since I can remember." Marin quickly made introductions, noticing the cold look in his captain's eyes.

"A pleasure, Captain," Alaya smiled lightly as she shook his hand. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a lot of work to do. Marin, I imagine I'll drop by later, so stay out of trouble."

Marin shook his head as the young scientist turned and entered the laboratory. "Alaya's looked after me for years. She seems to think it's her duty to keep an eye on me."

"Obviously. Alaya, is that really her name? Who in their right minds would name their child 'Beloved'? Honestly!"

"She was the firstborn," Marin replied quietly. "Her parents loved her greatly."

Alaya entered the laboratory and clenched her hands tightly into fists. Corin's coldness had bothered her for reasons she didn't understand. It also bothered her how she and Marin had had to pretend to be just friends, rather than be brother and sister as they were. _It has to be done, though. No one would believe it if they knew Petrarch's firstborn was a daughter instead of a son. It's best for Marin if I pretend to be his friend and not his older sister. Besides, this way I have no fear of false friends coming out of the woodwork._ She noticed a terminal blinking in the corner and walked over; there was a lot of work to be done, and no time to spend on musings and speculations.

Laura shook her dark head, which was disheveled from a night's rough sleep. _This is getting ridiculous_, she thought. _I _must_ be going insane_. Getting up from her bed, she got herself ready for the day, but instead sat down at her terminal. _Time to do a little hacking. What exactly is HALO-04?_ She'd avoided looking at that file for fear of getting caught: it was heavily encrypted, and she didn't want to risk Lorient's exposure. When she powered up the system, though, new files on the Covenant caught her eye. _These may be useful_.

****November 19, 2552 0900 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

Laura heard the Spartan come in, but her dream had left her in one of her moods and she didn't really care much. Besides, she had plans to make and hacking to do. "What do you want?"

"Just wanted to talk," a female voice replied. She turned around to see Linda in the doorway.

"I'm not in the best frame of mind to chat right now. Not that any of you would really care if I was," she replied, turning back to her computer terminal. Data scrolled across the screen, encrypted with the unusual runic text Linda had seen encoding Laura's private journal. Linda noticed the look on her face turn from boredom to mild surprise.

"That's interesting. Now why would Ackerson be interested in that?"

"What's he interested in?"

Laura shook her head. "I'm really not in the mood today. Please, just go so I can do what a _mistake_ does best." Her tone took on a bitter edge with the word 'mistake.'

"I'm not going anywhere. You know something, something Ackerson wants to keep quiet. He's our enemy too, you know. What's he hiding?"

A small smile tugged at the corners of Laura's mouth. "I don't know, all I have are guesses, really. Most of what I do know is obtained usingâ€|less than savory means." As quickly as it had appeared there, the smile disappeared. "From what I can tell, what he's doing is worse than his usual black ops, but all I've managed to pull are little more than shadowed hints and dark clues, nothing concrete."

Laura stared at the screen, thinking about this latest tidbit of information, when Lориenna's voice echoed through the room.

"Ackerson's just requested a number of files from Section Three. About 75 files in all, mostly medical records." Laura's head came up sharply.

"You said _75_ medicals files from _Section Three_?"

"Correct. Having intercepted the files and read them for myselfâ€|"

"No, don't tell me, I have an idea as to what they are." Her head bowed, recalling exactly what those files contained, reminded sharply that she was the cause for a number of things in them. _What use would he have for those? There's nothing in them that he doesn't know already._

"What's he up to?" Linda asked again. "And what does he want with those files?"

"I don't know what he's doing yet, as I said before."

"No, but you know _something_, " she returned. "What are you hiding?"

"If I keep secrets, it's because I have a damned good reason for it. There are some things it's better to let be. Don't ask me again."

"Oh, really? I think I have a right to know, and the rest of us do too, especially if it involves ONI Section Three."

"She's right, Laura," the AI put in. "They deserve to hear the truth, from you if not from ONI."

Laura frowned, knowing they were right.

"Yes, you do deserve to know the truth, but not all are here to hear it. Besides, I really don't want to tell it yet either."

"Fine, we'll discuss it another day. But remember, we're still going to have a talk." Linda got up and left, while Laura sat with her head in her hands.

Yes, we are going to have to talk, she thought miserably, _but you won't like what you'll hear_.

****November 21, 2552 1125 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****Camp Hayes****

A couple days later, Laura was sitting in her living room playing on her panpipes; not her best pair, since she hadn't had the chance to retrieve them from the Spartans yet. The melody was a simple one, but from the way she played one could swear that she was pouring her heart into her playing. As she finished the tune, she heard someone knocking at her door. _Who could that be? I'm not expecting anyone._ Setting down her panpipes, she crossed to the door and opened it a crack, her eyes narrowing in suspicion as she saw the four Spartans outside.

"Is there something I can help you with? Or are you here on your own?"

"Linda said you had something to tell us." Fred was surprised at her reaction: she seemed to visibly wilt right in front of them. Stepping back, Laura opened the door and let them in.

The Spartans gathered around the living room as Laura nodded to empty air. A holopad flickered on as a slender figure in a flowing gown of blue and silver materialized at her elbow.

"I've blocked the cameras. Right now, ONI thinks you're still piping away." A shadowy smile crossed the AI's face as she looked pointedly at the panpipes still resting on the small table.

"A mistress of bad puns, eh, Lориenna?"

"You should know as much as I."

Laura shook her head in silent amusement, which dissolved in an instant as she remembered why the Spartans were here.

"You might want to sit down for this. I have a feeling we might be here for a while." She waited, frowned when they elected to remain standing, and took a deep breath. It seemed to all that she dearly wanted to avoid this conversation.

"None of this is going to be easy for me to explain, and even less easy for you to listen to. Technically, I shouldn't even be telling you this, but I think you deserve to know, and you won't find anyone else who will tell you. It's a long story.

"I guess it all begins with a four-year-old girl in a little country town. There was little or no military presence in the area, just a small base used by the reserve companies and trainees. This made the base a perfect HQ for the intelligence personnel to use as a staging point. Somewhere along the way, the spooks decided they needed to test out one of their Special Warfare projects on more than just a computer simulation. They ran a computer check and found what they considered a perfect test case: the daughter of a prominent

doctor/microbiologist and an up-and-coming naval officer. Even better, her place of residence was practically next door to one of their staging areas.

"It wasn't easy for them to get a hold of their new test subject, though. She had two prominent parents who might protest, besides two brothers: while the one was only two years old, the other was closer to eight and would remember his younger sister more clearly. They had to make a lot of promises to 'secure' the candidate, one of which being that she would be allowed to visit her family from time to time. By the time they had her under their control, the kid had no idea what was going on. All she knew was that her parents had told her she'd be ok, and so she blindly put her trust in the spooks.

"Once here training was under way, Section Three realized they'd made their first mistake. While intelligent and an avid learner, she lacked the focus and discipline that older children had, and her attention frequently wandered. They'd taken her at too young an age; she hadn't even entered school before her 'conscription'. In the project record they noted that four was too young, and advised the other project members to wait for a few years before selecting the rest of the candidates: the bare minimum for the age group was six years old." A look of disgust crossed her face, and she went on, "After the first few visits home, her observers noticed that the family visits were interfering with her training: she'd come home having been lectured by her mother and father on good manners and disciplined for occasionally bullying other children her age. Since the spooks wanted a killing machine, this was a definite problem. Unfortunately there was nothing they could do about it, since her parents had enough clout to demand the visits. They tried, of course, they really did, but when she was denied a trip home she refused to train. Her parents were even angrier than she was, and demanded that the visits continue; her father even went to top ONI officials with his complaint. ONI had no choice but to give in. Their next set of recommendations led to the next set of candidates being kidnapped and replaced with flash-clones."

Her voice began to crack, and she looked down at her feet; it was a while before she could look up at them again, and even then she didn't meet their eyes. The Spartans realized she was talking about herself each time she had mentioned the four-year-old girl. When she spoke, her voice was shaky, as if she was struggling to maintain composure.

"I was sickened and disgusted when I found out what had been done to those children. It was even more appalling when I found out that those flash-clones died young. The other Spartans' parents had no idea anything was wrong. And I had no idea that there were others until I was twelve. Mom had been called to Reach to assist with a flu outbreak, and Dr. Halsey had requested that I come along; apparently she wanted to observe me for herself. ONI was more than happy to allow it, since they wanted to see how well I'd react with the other trainees. I got a little suspicious when they assigned an ONI operative to baby-sit me, and after I was ambushed by a group of Marines twice, I started keeping a knife on me at all times. The only good thing about that trip was a young trainee named Kelly, who actually saved my hide a couple times when she could have let well enough alone.

"When Mom and I returned from Reach, I made my first hack into ONI's computer systems, and started piecing the truth together. I was angry and disgusted with everything I learned, but the worst part was still coming. I saw the research reports they were planning for the SPARTAN-II augmentations, and knew what was going to happen. There was no way I could warn the others, and even if I had they wouldn't have believed me. All I could do was wait and hope.

"They put me on a space station for the augmentation, and pretty much threw the kitchen sink at me. Everything you got, I got, only I got it a few months ahead of time just so they could see the results. Computer simulations and predictions were all well and good, but there's nothing like first-hand field-testing. It didn't matter to them whether I lived or died: they just wanted to see if their new plans would work. To a degree, they did, but I barely survived the procedure. ONI figured that if I had survived with my 'flawed' training, surely the Spartans on Reach would have a better chance.

"As soon as I was fully recovered and back into my regular routine, I hacked into the systems again; I wanted to see if the other trainees had survived. When I saw the numbersâ€¦" She paused, hands tightly clenched into fists. She'd never come this close to losing control before. "I think that was the straw that broke the camel's back. I couldn't take it anymore: I was being used, and had been from Day One. There was no one I could talk to, not even my parents; my own family refused to believe what I tried to tell them, claiming that I was just bitter about being away from my family. 'It's an honor to be asked to serve the way you were,' my father told me; my mother said similar things. How could I tell them what had been done, all in the name of the 'greater good?' People were maimed, tortured, and killed, and the UNSC turned a blind eye." She got up and paced the room, reminding them of holovids from their early days of training: caged animals looking for a way to escape.

"And the worst of it is, everything that was done to you, every ounce of pain you've gone through, was my fault. All of it. The training, the augmentation, everything was done to you because of me, the human guinea pig for the SPARTAN project."

Throughout her story, the Spartans had sat immobile, trying hard not to interrupt but finding it impossible to believe. When they'd realized she was the four-year-old girl that had been chosen first, it had sickened them to think ONI could choose her so young. Hearing how she was allowed visits to her family had angered them, and finding out about the flash clones had infuriated them. They remembered the visit she'd made to Reach, of course, but hadn't expected it to be a test at all. What had disgusted them most was the fact that she felt guilty for everything that had happened to them, when there was nothing to feel guilty about. None of them were willing to believe that she had told them the truth, unfortunately, even though they knew she was right.

"You actually expect us to believe these lies?" Fred hissed through clenched teeth.

"I don't expect anything from you, I never have," she replied quietly. "If I could have avoided this conversation I would have, believe me. I didn't find out the truth until my trip to Reach, and when I learned it I didn't want to believe it. It was hard enough to

believe ONI had lied to me about being the only Spartan, but trying to believe that Dr. Halsey and the others were responsible for all this was incomprehensible at first. Over time, I realized it was true, but who would have listened? All my parents knew was that I was a SpecOps soldier; I had no one who would listen to me until I convinced ONI to let me spend time at the local high school. I was forgetting what I was fighting for, I told them, and I needed to remember. They agreed, and I finally found someone I could trust my heart to in safety, someone who would listen to me and stand by me when it counted. ONI realized too late what had happened, but I warned them that if anything happened to Nicole or her family, I'd leak the truth to local newspapers and spread the word." She laughed angrily. "They left Nick and her family alone after that. Ironical that when a friend is in danger, I become the ruthless soldier they wanted in the first place."

"I don't understand, though," Linda mused. "Why didn't Dr. Halsey at least try and stop all this?"

"Because ONI had her over a barrel as well. She did try to intervene at times. When she received the results of my augmentations, she tried to stall it for you. I found a file she'd sent to ONI, asking for more time to run more tests, find ways to increase the survival rate of her patients. ONI sent back a reply which basically said that if she didn't do it, they'd find someone else who would." Laura stopped pacing and frowned as she recalled the terse message. "You Spartans were basically her children. She felt guilty about the whole thing, otherwise she'd never have sent that message in the first place."

"And you? What about you?" Laura gave a short, angry laugh at the Master Chief's question.

"Me? Me nothing! I was the test case. All Dr. Halsey knew about me was what ONI allowed her to know. She never knew who I was until after my trip to Reach. Even then, I doubt she ever connected my name with that twelve-year-old kid. After my augmentations were completed, I practically disappeared from ONI's files. Only the ones with top-level clearance even know my name."

"Then how did you find out?" Fred asked, scowling. "You certainly don't have clearance for anything!"

"That's all you know," Lorianne replied smoothly before Laura could let fly with some very nasty expletives. Having remained silent for long enough, the AI decided to take part in her creator's defense. "Shortly before I was created, Laura began to notice a number of files with less-than-capable encryption schemes, almost as if whoever sent them out wanted them to be read. I've seen a number of them myself, and managed to trace their origins. You were wrong, Laura: Dr. Halsey did remember you, and apparently guessed that you were smarter than ONI thought. She left those files open because she wanted you to know."

"And how would she have even guessed I was snooping around? I certainly didn't leave that many clues behind, and ONI still hasn't found out."

"No, but Dr. Halsey is smarter than ONI herself," the AI replied, crossing her arms in front of her, a gesture Laura herself used at

times.

"So she knew I was hacking. Why didn't she report me then? Surely she feared her work would be exposed."

"Maybe she was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt," Will muttered; it was the first words he'd said all through.

"Whatever the case, I've told you the truth. You can take it or leave it, but there it is. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some things I need to take care of." The Spartans rose, but the Master Chief still had one more question.

"You said the only good thing to come from your trip to Reach was your friendship with Kelly. Why?"

"She didn't lie to me, she saved my ass when she could've laid low, and she was the closest I ever got to a friend before I met Nicole. If I could have had time to get to know her without ONI spying on me all the time, I would have." All the Spartans noticed as her eyes flicked to a pair of combat knives in battered sheaths resting on the table. _Either she's nervous, or Kelly gave her those_, the Chief thought. For some strange reason, he felt grateful to his missing friend for that.

19. Chapter 18: Killer Obstacle Course

Some of you might recognize parts of this: Blade has to run the obstacle course before a big mission, but Ackerson has other ideas. Note: she has no Mjolnir armor at this point. Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Eighteen: Killer Obstacle Course

****November 25, 2552 1030 hours****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

General West looked out over the obstacle course uneasily; Laura was scheduled to run it this morning in preparation for the upcoming operation, but Colonel Ackerson had made some 'modifications' to the course. He turned to the older woman standing next to him.

"Dr. Gedeon, maybe you shouldn't be here. You won't like what you see."

"Laura said the same thing, but I don't believe her reasons as to why. It's hard to believe that the UNSC would want to harm one of their own soldiers, no matter how different."

West didn't have the heart to contradict her; he'd seen what they tried to do. _It's amazing how blind a parent can sometimes be, but how could she know?_ He cleared his throat and looked up to see Ackerson and four Spartans approaching. The Spartans were clad in normal military uniform, but looked uncomfortable and out of place in it, whereas Ackerson wore an uncharacteristically pleased look on his face.

"Blade should be about ready, General."

"Good. Bring the cameras online."

A nearby table held several viewscreens, which all came to life at the same time. Five showed the various sections of the obstacle course, one showed the end of it, and one showed the inside of a field command dome. Inside it, a young woman in a form-fitting blacksuit was finishing her preparations. She paused for a moment to flip her dark braid over her shoulder, look up and wave, a smile on her face that spoke volumes—she was worried, but prepared for whatever would be forthcoming.

"General West, you there?" From the sound of her voice, she was completely unconcerned about the day's events.

"I'm here, Laura. So's Colonel Ackerson. He's made a few minor adjustments to the obstacle course."

"I had I feeling he might, so I prepared accordingly. You mind if I do some calisthenics while I wait? Nothing clears your head like a good round of callys."

"No, Blade, make whatever preparations you need." Ackerson's voice dripped with scorn that Laura and her mother both heard.

Inside the command dome, Laura stretched her limbs, did a series of slow backflips, and finished with slow karate moves. As her countdown elapsed, only West saw her hand move down to flip a switch at her belt. She turned back to the entrance as several Helljumpers entered and opened fire.

Dr. Gedeon was shocked. "What are you doing? This isn't an obstacle run, this is murder!"

West turned to her and shook his head. "I was afraid this would happen. You shouldn't be here, Doctor."

"I have to be here! That's my daughter out there!"

Laura, meanwhile, had known for a while about this attack, having confirmed her suspicions the night before by hacking into ONI's database. She had accordingly prepared some surprises of her own. The portable shield generator was one of these surprises; while she still hadn't fully worked out all the bugs yet, it was more than enough to counter standard UNSC munitions. She watched as the Helljumpers fired at her, then noticed her shieldbar was dropping ever so slightly. I think I've freaked them out enough. At that point, she moved like a blur, incapacitating her attackers with incredible speed. When the dome was clear, she waited while her shields recharged, taking guns, ammunition, grenades, and combat knives from her fallen enemies. She strapped as much as she could to her blacksuit, and loaded the rest into a hip-satchel she'd stowed there earlier.

"So, Ackerson, what did you think of my latest toy? Portable shield generator I designed for our Marines, which I've been aching to suitably test." There was a definite sound of sarcasm in her tone.

"How dare you--"

"I'll dare quite a few things to ensure my survival, just as you will to try and ensure my death. I'll still complete this course, in spite of your stacked deck, and by your own twisted rules."

Dr. Gedeon was speechless as she glanced at Colonel Ackerson, who was white with suppressed rage. Then she realized the truth: Laura had been right all along. _How could I have been so blind? All this time she tried to tell me, and I never listened?_ She continued to observe the obstacle course, hoping and praying her daughter would survive it.

Laura had finally reached the gravel field, which recruits had to cross barefoot. She had a suspicion about this part of the course; pulling a grenade from her hip-satchel and arming it, she threw it into the gravel field and winced when a Lotus mine detonated.

"I had a feeling this would happen. Ackerson needs to get some new ideas; either that, or he needs to start using more complex encryptions on his files."

She looked exactly where the mine had detonated and backed away; getting up a good running start, she leapt into the air and landed in the safe zone. Several thrown grenades and several jumps later, she was through the minefield and running to the next part of the course.

This was a more difficult part: recruits had to crawl under barbed wire while live rounds were fired overhead. As she suspected, chainguns were lining each side of the course. Pulling a box-like shape from her pack, she held it to her face and said:

"Sever power lines to chainguns."

Immediately, several disks shot out from the box in all directions. West had seen them before: Laura used them for her workouts. He was also one of the few who had a basic idea how they worked. The disks were equipped with retractable blades and voice-encoded, Laura had told him once. All she needed to do was give a specific order and radio transmitters controlled the disks remotely. While they were severing the power lines, Laura crawled under the razor wire to the other side, and spoke one word: "Return." The blades retracted and the disks slotted themselves into the box.

"How did she know?"

"She's a lot smarter than she lets on, Ackerson. The fact that she was able to view your private files proves it. You only see her as stupid because you only see her as a mistake. As such, she can easily fool you."

"Blade is a nothing, a nobody, a mistake! I should have eliminated her long ago!" Ackerson snapped, momentarily forgetting where he was and who else was around.

"How dare you!" Dr. Gedeon screamed, the rage in her voice surprising the onlookers; they'd never seen her so angry. "That mistake is my daughter, and the most valuable asset you have! She is somebody, and worth more than you!"

Meanwhile, completely oblivious to the shouting match going on elsewhere, Laura had arrived at the rock wall, where the harness had been pulled to the top and the grips had been removed. _No big deal, _she thought. _I can handle this._ Taking her bladed disks out again, she threw them one at a time above each other to make handholds in the wall. It was a slow climb, and her hands were bleeding by the end of it, but she made it to the top. The Spartans were impressed, even more so that she could have invented the machines to get her this far. John remembered a similar situation on Reach, over twenty years ago, where a twelve-year-old girl had climbed a rock wall without a harness.

At the top of the wall, Laura called her bladed disks to return before she attached a rappelling rope to the top and started down, but Ackerson had other plans. A Helljumper sprang into view at the top of the wall and cut through the rappelling line. Laura fell like a stone to the bottom, several feet below; she hadn't expected this, because it hadn't been done to the Master Chief on Reach. Laura hadn't looked beyond those files, and mentally cursed herself for her arrogance and stupidity. She managed to slow her descent by rotating her body, but it wasn't nearly enough; when she hit the ground, several bones were fractured. Still, she limped on to the next part of the course.

While she was completing that, her mother had begun pleading with Colonel Ackerson to desist, but he refused. The Spartans were shocked that he could allow such brutality, but were afraid to do anything but watch. General West was appalled by Ackerson's behavior, but he too was helpless to do anything; Ackerson was a member of the Security Council, and he had immunity. He suddenly drew attention to the monitors, where Laura was beginning the sprint to the end of the course. A Skyhawk jet had just completed a strafing run and was wheeling about. Laura had only gotten halfway to the end of the course, but she stopped and turned to face the oncoming jet.

"General, do something! She'll never survive!"

"Doctor, my hands are tied. I can't do anything."

As the jet approached its target, they heard Laura's voice over the com, sounding tired but triumphant.

"My last toy that needs testing. Tell me what you think."

As the jet approached, the Spartans tensed; the Chief remembered running the course under similar circumstances. Fred leaned close and muttered, "She doesn't have armor! That missile will tear her apart!" John nodded, not wanting to share the fear he felt for this mysterious Spartan. He felt strongly for her, but didn't understand why.

The jet fired a Scorpion anti-tank missile at Laura, who stood her ground, not even trying to run. As the missile got closer, she started finally to move: as her hand moved to her belt and flicked a switch, she disappeared in front of everyone and threw a grenade as far away from herself as she could. As she'd hoped, the missile's motion-sensors locked on to the grenade and the missile turned toward the movement; when it did, Laura turned and began to run as fast as

she could, just as the missile detonated a few meters away. When the smoke cleared, all the observers could see was a smoking crater.

"My baby! Laura!" Dr. Gedeon collapsed into sobs. John wished he could join her in grief. Only Ackerson looked triumphant, until the sound of a bell rang out clearly. Thirty-seven times it rang, a clear, piercing note. After about five seconds of silence, a tired voice came over the COM.

"One ring for every year of torment I've been through, one ring for every year ONI stole from my life. I'm heading back, so don't bother to send out a recovery team."

"Laura? Where are you?"

"Right here."

She appeared from out of thin air next to her mother, pale and bloody and limping, but alive. Everyone was shocked, thinking she had been killed by the blast.

"How on earth--"

"I've been working on this for some time. Cloaking device, stolen from the Covenant, reversed-engineered and modified to reduce heat output. I turned it on, tossed a grenade, and moved just before the missile detonated. If I had reacted any earlier than I did, the missile could have gone from targeting to heat-seeking mode, and I would've been dead; besides, motion sensors would have made running from the missile extremely difficult. It was a risk I had to take." One bloody eyebrow arched upwards as Laura recalled being yelled at during one of her workouts. "Fortunately, my pushing myself too hard too fast during my workouts has paid off; I had the speed I needed to avoid the worst of the impact. I was also damned lucky all the way around; there were so many ways that this could've gone wrong it's not even funny." She coughed, spat out blood, and turned to her mother. "I had hoped you'd never have to see this, never would have found out the truth like this. I'm sorry, Mom."

"You need to get to medical right away."

"Dr. Gedeon, if you even attempt to treat thisâ€"thing, it could cost you more than your life's worth." Ackerson was shaking with anger, but the threat behind his words was clear. Before anyone could react, Laura swung her closed fist as hard as she could and hit him across the jaw; there was an audible sound of bone crunching as it broke. From the force of the blow, it was plain to see that Laura had reached the end of her physical stamina; if she'd been at her peak she would have broken Ackerson's neck. As it was, Ackerson staggered backwards as Laura's dark eyes burned with rage, and when she spoke her voice quivered with barely restrained anger.

"You're damned lucky all you got was a broken jaw. But so help me, if you ever threaten anyone I care about againâ€"and I will find out if you do, make no mistakeâ€"I will personally make sure you experience the pain and discomfort of the hell you've made me live a hundred times over! And before you get any ideas, remember that you can't court-martial someone who doesn't exist!"

As she turned away, Laura staggered, then fell to the ground,

collapsing from extreme pain and blood loss. The Spartans rushed over to assist. Dr. Gedeon checked her daughter's vital signs and looked at them.

"I need to get her to the ER." They nodded and scooped her up. Carrying her to a nearby Warthog, they loaded up and drove to the medical center. John hoped to himself they would make it in time. _I've never seen nerve like this before. If she dies, we'll lose a valuable asset. _But somehow he knew he was hiding the whole truth from himself.

****November 26, 2552, 1245 hours****

****Adams Medical Facility****

****Camp Hayes****

Laura came to in a hospital bed, grimacing as soon as she realized where she was. _I hate recovery rooms, I really do_. She felt sharp pain in her right leg, and it hurt to breathe. Trying to sit up, she groaned as a fresh wave of pain flooded over her entire right side. _That'll be from the missile; I can't believe I flew three meters_, she thought wearily as she forced herself to stand up. Just as she was reaching for her uniform, the door opened.

"Laura Elizabeth!" her mother shouted; behind her Laura noticed four tall figures in the doorway.

"Yes, Mom?" she asked, trying to sound innocent.

"Get back in that bed this minute! You have no business moving this soon!"

"I daresay ONI would disagree," Laura snorted. "Any bets they'll have me back to my regular routine by tomorrow?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Dr. Gedeon snapped as she tried to push her daughter back into the bed.

"Mom, I'm fine," Laura muttered, then winced as her mother examined her right side.

"You always were a bad liar, Laura." The doctor shook her head. "Well, if you're insistent on moving this soon, at least take it easy for a few days, and go heavy on the biofoam, or else you're coming straight back here."

"Yes, ma'am." When the doctor left, Laura grabbed her uniform and started pulling it on, trying hard to ignore the four Spartans standing in the doorway.

"You sure you're fit?" Linda asked.

"Fit or not, I have to be up and about ASAP. There's still a lot of loose ends I need to take care of before we head out on that impossible mission. Besides, I hate hospital rooms."

"Why? I mean, you seem to spend a lot of time in this facility," Fred smirked.

Laura glared at him, her most intimidating look, the same one that could cause hard-core Marines to shit themselves. "I try not to go into in-patient rooms if I can help it. There's something about them that bother's me." _And I'm not telling you what it is, not yet._

Reaching for her uniform pants, Laura finished dressing and tried to stand up; she'd been leaning against a chair when she'd been dressing. It hurt, but she detached herself from the pain and tried to move for the door. The Spartans noticed her limping, but she still carried herself proudly. _If she can survive that, she's ready for the mission_, John thought. _I just wish she wasn't going._

Laura sensed the Spartans were studying her, and smirked. _They may not be going to kill me, but they still don't trust me. Good, we're all on the same page._ Well, almost. Nowadays she was having a hard time looking at the Master Chief without tons of butterflies going crazy in her gut. The last time she'd felt that was in high school, when she'd had crushes on various guys. _This may not be a good thing_, she thought. _Hopefully he doesn't go on the mission._ A stupid thought, since Spartans never turned down a mission, but she still hoped for it.

20. Chapter 19: Into The Lion's Den

The infamous "suicide op" you've all been waiting for, with some stuff inspired by The Rock. Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo:Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Nineteen: Into The Lion's Den

****November 28, 2552 0700 hours****

****Williams Airfield****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Laura waited to board the modified _Chiroptera_ stealth vessel with the other Spartans; she was amazed that ONI even had one of those relics lying around. Normally a three-person vessel, it had been specially modified and partially enlarged to accommodate the team of five Spartans in full body armor. She was vaguely uncomfortable with the 'new' suit of Mjolnir armor that she'd been issued for the mission, but her unease was more due to the mission itself. Capturing a Covenant warship was practically unheard of, and she had doubts as to the feasibility of her plan; there were simply too many unknowns, and she still wasn't exactly comfortable with the new squad she'd been assigned to for this mission. _Unfortunately, there's no other way, and they _do _know a lot more about Covenant cruisers_, she reminded herself. _I just wish he could have stayed behind._ Her feelings for the Master Chief had grown stronger since she'd been maneuvered into close contact with him on a regular basis, and it was getting harder to hide them. She forced herself to remain calm and cold, focusing on the mission. Looking around, she reminded herself that she was with ONI's best offensive soldiers (which could be as bad as it was a good thing), and scanned the sea of faces on the lift. While few people knew of the mission, there were enough faces

nearby to wish the Spartans luck. One face jumped out and the person it belonged to hurried to the edge of the pad. Laura walked over to the edge to meet her, on the pretense of warning her away.

"It's dangerous to be here, miss."

"I'm well aware of the dangers, but I have a three-edged blade to protect me."

Laura smiled inside her helmet because she knew well what this was about, a game of cat-and-mouse she and her friend Nicole played against ONI, always trying to be one step ahead and usually succeeding. Nicole pressed a small yet heavy bag into Laura's armor gauntlet, and grasped the other in both hands.

"Be careful."

"Always. See you in a bit." With that, Laura joined the other Spartans on board the stealth ship. The other Spartans were already squared away, and one of them looked at her as she stowed her gear.

"What was that all about?" She knew him by his voice, a sound that both frightened and thrilled her, and her heart began to pound even though her voice was icy cold.

"A trusted friend brought me a few special items for the mission, and wished me luck. I trust her implicitly, and that should be more than enough for any of you." Even though she knew they couldn't see it, Laura shot them a glare through her helmet.

Once they cleared Earth and entered Slipspace, Laura pulled off her helmet. She had tightly braided her long hair and pinned it to the top of her head to allow the helmet to access her neural net. Her dark eyes looked around once at the fully armored Spartans, then to the empty cockpit.

"Cortana, are you listening?"

Cortana's figure shimmered into view. "When am I not, Blade?"

Laura frowned at the mention of her codename, but composed herself immediately. "Okay, I'm going to outline my plan. I hate to say it, but I hope you can maybe give me a hand with some of the details.

"The basic idea of the plan is based on the fact that most of the Covenant are oxygen breathers, or at least oxygen tolerant. I managed to bribe the lab boys into cooking up a chemical weapon." She produced a sealed metal package with a detonator on the end. "VX poison gas, very popular in the late 1990s, and very lethal. It overloads the nervous system on contact, causing spine-shattering convulsions. If we plant this in their air supply, the detonator will render it into aerosol form; once that happens, it should wipe out most of the Covenant in one blow. The catch is that we could become exposed as well. In theory, the armor should protect us, but I'd recommend we get back here before the detonator goes off. If you are exposed to the gas, inject this directly into your heart." She pulled out a case containing five syringes. "Atropine. It will temporarily stop your heart, long enough to bypass the worst of the effects.

Let's hope we don't have to use it."

Fred spoke up. "How are we supposed to get to their air supply without raising alarm?"

"Put these on." Laura handed them each a small belt-like harness, putting one on herself. She smiled for a moment, flipped a switch on the belt, and vanished. Reappearing a moment later, she continued her explanation.

"I've been working with captured camouflage generators to be carried by our Marines, as well as the shields; I believe you saw me test one when I ran the obstacle course before we left. These are designed to interface with your armor's shields, in order to save power and cover the entire suit. It's not as powerful as I'd like yet, but it should be enough to get us to our objective and back. There are still a few minor details that I couldn't work out. First, I'd like to keep the Engineers alive to help run the ship. Then we also have to consider how to filter the gas from the ship's atmosphere so our crews can board it. Plus, I'm not sure the Grunts will be affected by the gas, between the fact of their being methane breathers and the fact of having their own life support systems in their armor. I can't seem to find a solution, and we're running out of time." The Spartans were a bit surprised by this; Laura had never asked anyone for help before, especially not them.

Cortana broke in, filling the sudden awkward silence. "I think I have a solution to your first problem. If we can get all the Engineers to one area of the ship, I can reprogram the environmental controls to make that a secondary area. That should protect them from the VX poison gas. Then, if there is a suitable planet listed in the Covenant database, we can exchange the atmosphere. As far as the Grunts are concerned, without an Elite they're fairly undisciplined and easy to bring down."

The Master Chief spoke up, his voice grim. "We may still have to deal with Covenant troops, if they can figure out a way to escape the gas. This isn't a good idea."

"No shit, Sherlock." Laura's voice was laced with the usual supply of sarcasm. "Unfortunately it's the best I could come up with. There's a strong chance that we'll be able to catch most of them off guard and even the odds. Personally, I'll take anything that'll help tip the odds to my side. Unless anyone has any better ideas?" She looked at each of them in turn. No one answered.

Cortana's voice came out through the intercom. "Exiting Slipspace in threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|mark!"

They came out in an area of Covenant-controlled space, near an asteroid field. Laura approved, since this would help provide cover from radar scans. Now all they had to do was wait. She pulled her helmet back on and waited for the go-ahead. If a Covenant ship happened to come near the asteroids, it would have to power down its shields to blast a path clear, which gave them a clear opportunity: they could slip inside the ship's shields and into the docking bay.

"Ship incoming," Cortana announced. "Detecting plasma powerup. Standby for landing."

Laura braced herself against the bulkhead of the ship, half-expecting instant death. She tried to cross her fingers, but the armor gauntlet prevented the gesture. The other Spartans were busy doing final checks on their armor, but Laura kept her back to the bulkhead, not really trusting them completely even though she'd been around them for over a month before this operation.

The ship landed hard inside the docking bay of the Covenant warship, tossing them into the bulkhead; after picking themselves up from wherever they'd wound up landing, the Spartans grabbed their weapons. Laura switched on her camouflage and stepped out of the ship, and the other Spartans followed her lead. They had to clear out the docking bay before they could proceed, but it didn't take long; their port was actually a repair bay, and almost deserted. Cortana, from inside the Master Chief's helmet, directed her to the main air supply, where she planted the nerve gas and set the detonator for ten minutes; she was surprised at how easily they'd made it there. _It's not over yet, Laura, don't get cocky,_ she thought. On the way back to the ship, Cortana halted the group.

"There's a data port here. Slot me in, and I can take care of the plan's loose ends from inside the network."

"Just watch your digital ass in there, Cortana. I saw the mission report on the _Ascendant Justice_'s AI. We don't need anymore of those little surprises." While her tone was harsh, Cortana detected a note of concern in Laura's voice.

As the Chief slotted Cortana into the port, an alarm sounded and all hell began to break loose; none of them knew what had set it off, but there was no time to speculate. Abandoning all pretense of secrecy, and deactivating their active camouflage to save power for their shields, the team made its way back to the landing bay, Laura acting as a rearguard. They were almost there when she turned to try and delay the pursuing Covenant forces.

"Blade, what the hell are you doing?" Fred yelled. On her motion tracker, Laura saw the Spartans turning around; a round from Linda's sniper rifle flew past her head and took out an Elite.

"Get going, there's not much time left! Don't worry about me, I'll catch up, just go!"

She continued to fire at the oncoming Covenant, buying time for the others to get back to the ship. Backing into the landing bay, she realized that she was running out of ammo for her rifle, and had no time to reload. There were simply too many Covenant coming after her, so she tried to turn and run just as a plasma grenade landed nearby. The detonation was too far away to kill, but it was enough to break her shields and send her flying into a protruding deck strut, jarred loose from a fragmentation grenade's earlier detonation. The shoulder armor was penetrated and she felt her shoulder pierced by the metal. _It's too late,_ she realized as she wrenched her shoulder free of the strut and rolled over to face her killers. _The timer's almost up._ She activated her external speakers as well as the COM in her suit. The Covenant soldiers surrounding her as well as the Spartans heard her defiance as she gripped the syringe.

"You're too late. The warriors of Earth will live to stop you again

and again. Humanity is safe."

As she injected herself with atropine, the timer reached zero; she watched the Covenant around her begin to jerk uncontrollably as the gas began to hit them. Closing all other COM channels, she forgot that one was still active, and the Master Chief heard her murmur one word as she succumbed to the atropine, a word that seemed to cause him more pain than any battle wound; it was all he could do to keep himself from running out of the ship.

"John."

21. Chapter 20: Now What?

Capture Covenant warship: check. What next? Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Twenty: Now What?

****November 28, 2552 1425 hours****

****Covenant Warship _Holy Retribution_****

****Unknown System****

Laura came back to consciousness a few hours later on the bridge of the Covenant ship. Her shoulder had been filled with biofoam and bandaged, and the shoulder plating on her armor had been removed; she saw the jagged hole where the strut had gone through, and felt she didn't want to know how bad her injuries had been. She sat up and tried to orient herself to her surroundings. The other four Spartans were nearby, cleaning their weapons and watching Covenant Engineers work on repairs. One of them turned and noticed her sitting up; by the voice, it sounded like Will.

"Welcome back. You were out awhile."

"The things I do for humanity," Laura said wryly. "What did I miss?"

"Not too much. We've found on a planet and are taking on air. Your plan almost worked flawlessly."

Laura decided to take that as a compliment and tried to stand up. She was barely on her feet for five seconds when she fell back down on her butt, denting the deck beneath her as she landed in full armor. Cortana materialized on a holopad near the control panels.

"You are still suffering the aftereffects of atropine poisoning. While the dosage was too small to be fatal, it was still enough to do some minor damage to your system."

Laura was unconcerned. "I'll be fine, Medical can fix me up when we get back. Where are we?"

"I've made a random jump according to the Cole protocol. At the moment, we are in an unknown system. There are still a few Covenant hunter-killer teams onboard, as well as a number of Grunts and possibly a Prophet, but most of them were wiped out." Cortana paused

for a moment. "I must say I'm impressed with how well the plan worked."

"Save the parades for later. We've got a lot of work to do before we head home." Laura got to her feet and managed to stay up this time. She looked with disdain on the punctured shoulder of her Mjolnir armor, nudging it slightly with her boot as she frowned down on it. "So much for my new suit. I much prefer the blacksuits. Those weren't used to the point of being worn out before I got them."

Fred looked at her, and when he spoke he was angry. "That armor is the best--"

"Correction: your armor is the best. I was given one of the suits you had before you got the ones that you have now. ONI figured that would reduce my survival chances by half. All they did was pound out the dents, polish it, and repaint it to make it look new and top-of-the-line." She smiled grimly, even though she knew they couldn't see it with her helmet on. "Ackerson has no idea how long I've been cracking his codes. I knew ahead of time what he was up to."

"Then why did you go on this mission?"

"Chief, I have my reasons. Besides, I made the mistake of being arrogant enough to think I could survive on my own. I thought my portable shield generator would save my sorry little ass, and look where it got me." She looked around at the Spartans, and when she spoke again her tone was almost softened and pitying. "You may as well know the rest of it. Ackerson sent us on this mission hoping to get us killed, and did his best to try and get everything FUBAR before we left; in case you didn't notice, we had almost no intel or recon, even though there've been several probes and scouts launched in preparation for this op. He hates the Spartan program, but can't get rid of it on his own, at least not without arousing suspicion. He sent us out expecting us to fail, and did his best to stack the deck and make sure we would."

Only Cortana wasn't surprised, since her own forays into ONI's network had yielded that very information. The rest were too shocked for words. Laura had laid it out straight, since it was part of her nature to be bluntly honest when she needed to make a point, not realizing that they trusted ONI almost to the core. She felt the tension and realized she'd better go.

"Cortana, where's the location of the nearest hunter-killer team?"

"Two levels down."

"Excellent. I'll be back shortly." She strapped on her shoulder plate (while there was that big hole in it, it was still better than nothing), camouflage belt, and her knives. Pausing at the doorway, she looked back at the Spartans and shook her head. "Not everyone in ONI is as evil as Ackerson, but they can't do anything to stop him, and most don't even know how despicable their boss really is. You deserved to." She turned on her camouflage.

"Cortana, seal the door after I leave. Don't open it for anything."

Cortana opened a private COM link. "How will you get back in if I seal the door?"

"Just leave it shut. If by some miracle I do succeed, you'll know."

With that, she walked out the door, anticipating not to make it back. She knew what lay ahead of her, but didn't care. Her pain was too great to let her turn around; she hadn't wanted to hurt him, but had to tell all of them the truth. This was the only way she could think of to make amends: either she'd erase the mistake ONI called Blade, or take out the enemy by performing the skills which had earned her that codename.

Back on the bridge, the Spartans contemplated the news Laura had given them. They were shocked that ONI could do such a thing, but there was no other theory to fit the facts: 1) that ONI had knowingly provided Laura an inferior suit of armor, 2) that Colonel Ackerson had attempted to send them on this mission without any intel or backup (not realizing the resourcefulness of both Laura and Cortana), 3) that he had tried to kill her on the obstacle course before they went on this mission, using almost the same methods as he had for the Master Chief. During their initial debriefing following their arrival on Earth, they all knew Ackerson hadn't been happy to see them alive, but none of them were sure why. Fred was still dubious about the whole thing, pointing out that Laura had a strong hatred of ONI for reasons unknown to any of them, when Cortana broke into the argument.

"She's right. I took the liberty of checking Ackerson's files on the Spartan program after the incident on the obstacle course. He not only demonstrates a loathing for the Spartan program, he also has a particular hatred for SPARTAN-000, possibly because she turned out impossible for ONI to control. No matter how hard they tried to put her in her place, she always managed to find a way out and turn the tables so that their schemes backfired."

"If she's as uncontrollable as you say, why should we believe her?"

"Because she has over time won the respect of most of the UNSC officers, has performed her duties extraordinarily, put herself at risk to give you and the rest of the Spartans time to get back to the ship," "Fred winced at that" "and because she is at this moment on her way to take care of a Covenant squad en route to the bridge." Cortana paused and shook her holographic head. "Something tells me she may not be planning to come back."

She replayed the conversation that had taken place before Laura left the bridge. While she was doing that, Cortana used the ship's security cameras to monitor Laura's progress. When she reached the Elite commandos, Cortana put it on a holographic viewscreen so the Spartans could watch. Laura had reached the Covenant, and disengaged her cloaking device.

"You cannot proceed any further. If you surrender now, I swear you will not be harmed. Or would you rather have it said of you that you were defeated by a female?" With that, she yanked off her helmet to reveal her face. The Master Chief thought it was even more attractive

than he'd seen yet; there was a fire in her eyes that he'd never really noticed before. Dropping her helmet on the floor, Laura drew her knives and waited for her words to hit home. As she had guessed would happen, the Elites were enraged by her taunts and rushed forward. Laura stood her ground and waited until they brought their energy rifles to bear.

In one fluid motion, becoming a whirling dancer of death in spite of the thick armor, she slipped past the first charging Elite and slit his throat; over a number of engagements with Elites, she'd learned that their shields were not equipped to repel projectiles that came at certain speeds—they could handle most weapons fire or melee attacks, but a knife was just slow enough to penetrate their defenses, while a sniper rifle projectile was fast enough to slip by. A second Elite lost his arm while a third was deprived of his arm and leg. The fourth was clever enough to maintain his distance after seeing what Laura was capable of. She made a quick end of the others, and watched the last warily. The Elite fired a series of plasma bolts, chortling as they hit their mark. The Spartans on the bridge watched in shock as Laura crumpled to the deck under the barrage, apparently dead.

"No, it can't be. Cortana, she can't have failed." The Chief spoke on a private link.

"Chief, I—| wait a second—| Oh how clever!"

As the Elite stood over his kill, a roar of pain escaped him as the point of a titanium blade appeared to grow out of his back. When he toppled over, they could see Laura was still alive. Her armor was burned and blackened from the plasma, and she winced as she stood up, but she was alive. She looked down at the dead Elites and shook her head.

"You fought well and honorably. Rest well and at peace."

Her next act surprised everyone; Laura walked up to what seemed like empty space and began to speak. Looking closer, they noticed a slight shimmer in the air and realized the 'empty space' was an Elite in active camouflage.

"I know you're there, and I know you can understand me. You are also not here to kill me or you would have attempted it by now. Since all these facts concur, it's safe to assume you were sent as an observer. Take this message back to your leader: this war is both useless and pointless. Too many have died already on both sides, and for no real reason. You say our destruction was the will of the gods, yet what mortal truly knows the mind of a god? Myself, I think this was merely a farce. While you spent all those months observing us, you began to fear us. You saw yourselves in humanity, and know we have the potential to become as powerful as you, so you chose to destroy us without giving us a chance. All you needed was a united armada, and so you decreed our existence as a blight upon the universe. Nothing unites a race quite as well as religion, so you rallied to one banner. Yet ask yourselves, what is the real reason? Are we really a blight on the universe, or are we merely a different facet of it? Was it the gods who called for our death, or mere mortals? What mortal being can truly fathom the all-knowing and intricate mind of a god?" She shook her head. "Our races are not so different, really. We could be so much stronger together, if you only give us a chance to prove

ourselves. Humanity is a staunch adversary, no matter the danger, and we never give up, that you must have seen by now. We could be far stronger together as allies than separated as enemies." With that, she turned and left the room, leaving all observers in shock with her words; her views made sense, but could be viewed as treason if an officer were to hear them.

****November 28, 2552 1530 hours****

Laura continued to sweep the area around the bridge, eliminating Covenant teams whenever she found them. It all seemed too easy; she wondered if her message had gotten through. _Time enough to worry about that_, she thought as the pain began to overwhelm her. _I've got bigger things to worry about right now. Better head back if I can._ The pain was getting too hard to ignore; she wondered how bad it actually was. She took the quickest way to the bridge she could find, hoping it would be an easy road. Surprisingly, Laura made it back with no trouble, until she got to the door and remembered it was sealed. Putting her helmet back on (having retrieved it on her way back), she listened in on the conversations going on inside the bridge.

"Cortana, is she outside yet?" _Linda's voice_, Laura thought.

"I can't tell, the cameras outside the bridge doors were disabled during one of the firefights earlier. Anybody could be out there."

"How many more commando teams are still onboard? Any guesses?" _Will, I think._

"I know better than to try. Hopefully, Blade got the rest of them. I never thought I'd see anyone better at knife-wielding than me." _Fred, definitely, he's the knife-specialist, plus I'd know that bitter tone anywhere._

"Even if she was outside, how would we know it was her?" _Will again._

"She'll find a way to let us know. Laura is more intelligent than she lets on." _Cortana, that_ was unnecessary. We need to have a very long talk, you and I._

Laura had heard enough to know what was going on, and was in too much pain to wait for very long. She keyed in on the COM and let loose a birdcall, specifically a red-winged blackbird. Almost immediately the chatter died.

"Cortana, what was that?" _That's him_, she thought, her heart pounding.

"A signal of some sort. I've never heard anything like it before. It doesn't match any known Covenant signals or codes."

"Then it could be anything."

"Chief, what about the all-clear?" _Linda again._

A few moments later Laura heard a six-tone whistle over the COM.

"Olly Olly Oxen Free? I take it there's an interesting story behind that." She paused a moment to inspect the burns, winced as she brushed the charred spot on her torso, and spoke again.

"As much as I'd like to just stand here and chat, I have some serious maintenance that needs to be done here. Mind sending out a repair kit or two?" In spite of her wry tone, the other Spartans could hear she was in pain. They opened the door and helped her inside.

"How long were you out there?" In spite of the faceplates, she knew it was Fred by the voice and the condescending tone; he wasn't too fond of her for reasons she didn't know. _Probably still pissed about the sparring,_ she figured. _He _really_ needs to get over that._

"About two or three minutes before I let out that birdcall. The amount of time you spent on Earth and you still didn't recognize it? Amazing." She grimaced as they touched the charred spot on her armor.

"Let's get this off and look at the damage."

Laura was in too much pain to even argue about modesty like she normally would have. She lay there while John and Fred pulled off the blackened portions of her armor. Fred whistled at the extent of the damage.

"How did you get so far with _that_?"

"I have a tendency to be bull-headed. Sometimes, it does more harm than good. Just patch me up, will ya? I'm not comfortable being naked in front of guys, even if it's only partially so." She wrestled with her helmet. "And I'm definitely not comfortable with helmets," she said as she dropped it to the deck.

About two thirds of her torso was burned and blistered from the plasma heat. She was bleeding slightly as well, and there was debris in the wound. John was almost sickened by the sight, and was glad the others couldn't see the worry on his face. Fred didn't say anything as he probed the wounds with a scalpel from one of their field medical kits, but his body language gave him away: the injuries bothered him as well.

"Laura, why didn't you wear your shield?" In spite of the armor, Laura knew it was Linda speaking.

"The shield I brought with me was still in its experimental stages. It's temperamental at the best of times, but when that plasma grenade went off, the entire protective field was overloaded by the electrical disruption. Basically, the entire shield unit is dead, fried worse than I am at the moment. Until I get it repaired, I'm on my own." She winced and shot a nasty glare at Fred, the nastiest one she could muster. "Why are you poking me? That hurts!"

"I'm trying to figure out the safest way to remove the dead tissue. I've never seen burns this bad before."

"Lucky. If you want to see bad burns, work in the emergency room with my mother sometime. Give me that scalpel." She grabbed the scalpel

and began to scrape the burned skin off her body bit by bit. John winced just watching her, even more than she was; he could see she was fighting not to cry out, especially since the tears that were gathering in her eyes were tears of pain.

"Damn, Laura, why don't you use an anesthetic?"

"I don't use them unless I have to. Besides, this is just a little burn. If you want pain, try being beat up by twenty ODSs with no way to defend yourself." She smiled wryly, and began talking in order to take her mind off the pain. "Believe me, this is nothing compared to some of the things I've seen my mother treat in the OR. Burns, broken and/or severed limbs, gunshots, knife wounds, you name it. Too many accidents happen on base, and most of them wind up being during her shifts. Add to that the fact that she also studies microorganisms and you've got one busy doctor. I've worked with her and lent a hand on the really busy days: it's really interesting stuff if you can stomach it. Pretty much everyone at that hospital knows me, and they're always glad when I can assist. I learn quickly, so all they need to do is tell me what they need and how to do it; it only takes one time and I'm up and running with the rest of them."

She finished scraping off the burned skin and began to clean out the wound. About five minutes later she had finished and was trying to put her armor back on; Fred and Will stopped her.

"As badly as you've been hurt, you wouldn't be able to stand wearing the armor. Leave it off."

"Since when do you know my limitations? I've withstood a hell of a lot worse than this dinky little burn!" They could tell she was lying by the slight quiver in her voice. She knew it too, and decided to change the subject.

"What did you mean by firefights earlier? I thought it was too easy on my rounds earlier; did they bypass me and come after you guys?"

"Yes, they did. There's also a possibility that there's still more of them on board." Will's tone was grim.

"I'll just have to take care of them later. Now I'm worn out, and I'd guess I'm not the only one. We need to rest up before we do anything else, or we won't be combat-ready if the shit hits the fan; get some sleep, I'll take first watch." As the Spartans' heads snapped around in shock, Laura shook her head. "As I said, I'll be fine. You need the rest more than I do, and I've got too much on my mind to sleep. I need to think more than anything else, but don't worry, I'm still in fairly good shape."

John didn't like it, but couldn't argue without giving himself away. "Wake me after six hours. I'll take the watch after you." As one, the Spartans dropped off to sleep, leaving Laura alone with Cortana.

"You are planning to wake him up, aren't you?"

"No, actually I wasn't. No need for him to know that, though. I'm in too much pain to sleep."

"You said it didn't hurt all that much."

"It's not that kind of pain, Cortana, even though that does hurt something awful: it feels like someone's constantly stabbing me in the side with a fork. You'd have to be human to really understand, and I can't describe it properly. No point in talking about it, really; I have to deal with this on my own terms." She drew one of her combat knives and stared at it thoughtfully; the reflection staring back at her revealed a grim look on her slightly-rounded face, with strands of dark brown hair drifting around to frame it. Slowly, Laura spun the knife around and pointed the knife to her chest, preparing to plunge it into her heart, but she hesitated for a moment before spinning it away again. Cortana's holographic image watched curiously.

"Are you planning some form of self-deletion?"

"Hardly, Cortana, as I said before, you wouldn't understand. Just let me be."

"Are you in love with him?" The AI's words sent Laura's head upward in shock.

"How--?"

"You forgot to turn off a com channel earlier, and the Chief and I heard you say his name. When are you going to tell him?"

"I'm not." Laura shook her dark head. "He cares nothing for me, none of them do. I could be killed right now and none of them would care. All I am is a hindrance, a nobody who just happened to be the guinea pig for the SPARTAN project. The only reason they put up with me is because of orders from High Command; otherwise they'd probably kill me now and be happy to do so. Even if any of them really appreciated me, I'd still be nothing more than an outsider. I'm nothing more than a mistake that was never corrected or erased." She paused. "ONI did all they could to erase my existence, once they found they couldn't control me, but they tried and failed to erase me. You read the files Lorient gave you?" When Cortana nodded, she went on, "Then you know everything, so I shouldn't need to explain it to you. They'll stoop to anything if they think it'll give them an advantage over me. If they found out I loved someone outside of my family, they'd try to use him against me. I don't want to put anyone through that, especially not him. I do love John, but it's one of those things that can never be."

Neither of them realized that John was still awake, and had been watching and listening the whole time. However, Cortana did notice an anomaly on the bridge sensors.

"I'm detecting something unusual on the sensors, Laura."

"I know. He's been there since I came on the bridge."

"You knew he was there? And you didn't say anything?"

"There was no need to say anything." Laura laughed softly and mirthlessly. "After spending a lot of time on my own, I've learned to tell what does and doesn't belong in any setting, even foreign ones; I noticed he was behind me the moment I stopped outside the bridge

doors, but he made no move so I let him be for a time. He's only an observer, not really a threat to any of us. We've been speaking no secrets, so all he's really picking up is what humans are like when they're not fighting for survival. Poor guy's probably bored out of his skull watching and listening to me prattle on and on about nothing."

"Still, he could be a threat."

"Cortana, if he was an assassin he would have attacked us by now, at which point I would have slit his throat. Okay, maybe not slit his throat, but at least captured him in one piece."

"You seem uneasy about killing Covenant soldiers where most humans would enjoy the prospect. Why?"

"I have a slightly skewed perspective on life, Cortana. I've never liked killing, even when it was necessary. Plus, as you no doubt heard earlier, I believe this whole war was all started with a misunderstanding. If I can, I take people alive rather than kill outright, which is perfect for stealth missions, but not so good on the front lines. What keeps me fighting is the hope that I can save the people I care about from certain death as much as possible."

Laura's eyes filled with tears, which surprised Cortana—"she'd never seen a Spartan cry, let alone this particular Spartan. When she spoke again, her voice was a whisper. "I committed my first murder when I was twelve years old, Cortana. I turned off life support for a 90-year-old woman because she was suffering. She and her family had begged the doctors for an end, but they kept refusing. I couldn't bear to see her suffering any longer, so I snuck out of the base one night and pulled the plug, and have felt guiltier than hell about it ever since." She paused and carefully wiped away the tears on her face; it wouldn't do to have to explain how she'd gashed herself wiping off her face in Mjolnir armor. "I haven't felt the same way about killing someone since then. It's one thing to train to kill people you've never met, it's quite another to kill someone you care about. If you could have been there maybe you'd understand."

"Perhaps. I did read your files, remember. Several references to Helen Gedeon's death were included when ONI was trying to decide what to do about your going AWOL."

"Yeah, they weren't too thrilled about that. As I recall, it took them a while to figure out how I managed to sneak out, and they still got it wrong." Laura shook her head and stood up. "Speaking of files, have you picked up on anything useful in there?"

"The Covenant still have no idea we've captured this ship, so for now we're all-clear. However—" Cortana's holographic figure stared off into space. "Well, that's interesting."

"What's interesting?" Laura asked, an expression of curiosity on her face.

"According to a number of archived transmissions I've decoded, there is a piece of recently-scavenged Forerunner technology which apparently allows people to access memories. If you could bring it up

to the bridge, we could keep an eye on it until we get back to Earth."

"Where is it? Can you get me to it?"

"I've placed a NAV marker on your HUD. You should be able to get there and back fairly quickly. Just make sure you hurry: there's no telling what might happen if you take too long."

"I'll be quick. Just let me wake someone up to hold the fort, and I'll be gone."

She shook the Master Chief awake, or so she thought. "It's a shame to wake you, but Cortana's given me a new objective: a unique piece of technology onboard the ship. I'm going to bring it back here so we can start looking it over before our scientists tear it to pieces. Shouldn't take long, I'll be back before you know it."

22. Chapter 21: Remember That?

This kinda explains all the dreams mentioned in previous chapters, and features another run-in with the vengeful Elite. Have fun! Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Twenty-One: Remember That?

****November 28, 2552 1545 hours****

****Covenant Warship _Holy Retribution_****

****Unknown System****

Laura followed the blue NAV point in her HUD as she made her way to whatever Cortana had found on the ship. Surprisingly, there was almost no opposition, until she got to the destination itself: a very familiar-looking Elite was standing between her and her objective.

Maro 'Iramee did not need to see the face of this human, this demon, to know it was the same he had confronted many units before. The record of this demon battling his brothers had shown him all he needed to know, and more. _A female? What female could slay so many of my brothers? Yet she is the Demon, or one of many Demons._ He roared and prepared to charge.

Laura didn't really feel like tussling with an Elite at the moment, between her shoulder and her plasma burns. Sidestepping the snarling creature's charge, she gripped it by the back of the neck and threw it against the wall. Making sure it was out cold, she picked up a small, circular object and left the room, on her way picking up the Elite and tossing it into an escape pod.

"Get lost," she muttered, hitting the eject button.

'Iramee came to in an escape pod, wondering exactly what had happened. He had been thrown against a wall and lost his senses, and the human had the very object he had been assigned to protect. He felt the pod drifting in space as he hoped for his brethren to find

him and exact revenge on this female demon.

****November 28, 2552 1615 hours****

About a half hour later, the Spartans were grouped around a headset-like object on the deck. For some reason, the delicate contours of the device seemed familiar to Laura, but she couldn't place it. _It's almost as if I've seen it before, but where and when I can't recall,_ she mused. Somehow, though, she knew exactly what to do: putting the device on her head, she adjusted the sizing so it fit her perfectly. There were small openings in the back that were clearly made for power connections of sorts; she ran lines from them to the bridge console.

"Laura, what are you doing?"

"I really don't know, but I do. Somehow I know exactly what I'm doing. Besides, one of us needs to test it, and I'm the best choice since I'm the least valuable. Would you like to see what this does?"

Without waiting for an answer, Laura sat still and waited for something to happen. Partly because her conversation with Cortana was still fresh in her mind, she began to think about the first woman she ever killed, the first time she could say that a part of herself truly died.

It was almost 10:00 at night, 2200 hours by military time. She knew if she were caught, there would be hell to pay, but that didn't matter anymore. Creeping silently out the gate, she headed for the local hospital. No one noticed her slipping out, or so she thought. Was there someone behind her? No, probably just a trick of the shadows. She got to the hospital easily, and headed up to room 431, in the hospice wing. There were a number of people already there, some she hadn't seen in years.

"How is she? Have they let her go yet?"

"She's in pain, but they're still holding out for a cure. They're not going to let her rest, Laura."

"Sometimes the Hippocratic Oath can be such a nuisance. We made the decision, she made the decision, but they still won't let her go?"

"There's no way we can change their minds." The older woman, a much younger Dr. Gedeon, shook her dark head. "She wants to see you."

Laura walked into the room, grimacing at the scent of death that lingered from other dying patients. In a bed by the window lay an old woman, connected to life-support machines by several tubes. Her white hair was almost gone, she could barely see, and she couldn't really hear. Laura was only 12, but she could tell the old woman was in pain.

"Nana?" she asked, her voice pitched low enough for the old woman to hear her.

_"Angel, how are you?" The dry, creaking voice brought tears to her

eyes._

_ "I'm here, Nana. I came as soon as I could. Oh, my poor Nana." _

_ "Laura, could you bring me a glass of water?" Laura returned shortly with the water, and helped the old woman drink while she waited to hear more._

_ "Laura, will you do something for me?" _

_ She knew what would be asked of her, and hated herself for answering. "Yes, Nana, anything." _

_ "Will you let me go?" _

_ "Yes, Nana. I'll help you be free." She moved to the life-support machines and turned them off. Going back to the old woman, Laura picked up the frail body in her arms, rocking it back and forth as if the old woman were a child, and began to sing a lullaby in a clear voice. A nurse came in and stood there in shock for a brief moment, then tried to turn on the machines again; Laura shook her head._

_ "It's too late. Nana's free now, like you never allowed her to be before." _

_ "What have you done?" _

_ "What I had to do. Rest assured that Helen Gedeon wasn't the only one to die today." _

_ She lay the old woman's body back on the hospital bed, and picked up a pair of scissors; cutting off a long lock of her dark brown hair, she wrapped it around the withered fingertips, squeezed the gnarled hands briefly, and left the room. Only her family waiting outside could tell she was holding back a lot of pain. Her mother looked at her, just as the nurse and several doctors approached in anger._

_ "Dr. Gedeon, do you have any idea what this young woman has done to your mother? She disconnected the life-support and killed her!" _

_ "Laura? Is this true?" _

_ "Nana asked me to do it. She wanted a way out, but no one would let her go. I did what I needed to do for her. She'd given me so much over the years; I couldn't deny her last wish for peace. Believe me when I say I wish it didn't have to be me." She stared at the doctors and nurses, tears beginning to stream down her face; they hadn't expected that kind of reaction. "Since you ignored the requests of family and patient, I had to murder my own grandmother. What would you have done if you had been forced into that position?" She turned and walked away, heading back to the base, not realizing until too late that she had been followed and watched the entire time._

Laura opened her eyes to see the shock on Cortana's face; the Spartans still had their helmets on so she couldn't tell what they were feeling, if in truth they felt anything at all.

"I had to sneak out of the base for the funeral, so ONI didn't catch on too soon and try to stop me. Once the main ceremony was over, I waited until everyone dispersed and laid a wreath of Nana's favorite flowers on the coffin: lilies of the valley. I did let Mom know I was there." _The panpipes played in mourning, sweet and sadâ€¦|_

As she thought back to the solemn day, they saw and heard everything she saw, felt what she felt. John and Will had heard the mournful tune before on a grassy hill one night: they'd seen a woman in a filmy white dress playing, but when they got closer, all they could find was trampled grass and a set of carved pipes bound together: it was as if they had seen a ghost. John remembered seeing Blade's face as he'd looked back, but it had been only for an instant, just long enough to make him think he'd imagined it. Now they understood who had been on the hill, but didn't know why she had been there, or why she'd left them her panpipes.

"Laura, how do you know how this device works?" Cortana was genuinely curious.

"All I have are theories, Cortana, theories that happen to fit the few facts we have. Shall I go over them, or would it bore you too much?"

"Please, continue."

"Well, to start with, how is it that Halo was constructed so much like Earth's climate and atmosphere? It was almost an exact match. Next, take into account that all the remaining Spartans have almost an innate ability to use both Covenant and Forerunner technology. Then factor in that the Monitor on Halo kept referring to the Master Chief as if he were an old friend, although some of that may have been due to the AI equivalent of insanity. Now thisâ€¦| as I said, I only have theories, but they make sense. I think that at least _some_ of the Forerunners were humans. It could also have been a conglomerate of races, like the Covenant today, working side by side in peace. As far as the connection with my theories and the present dataâ€¦" Laura paused for a moment, considering her words. "â€¦there are a few theories on Earth regarding an obscure concept called genetic memory. For those of you who may have heard of it, I'll try not to bore you with the explanation." She nodded at Cortana, a slight smirk on her face.

"The whole idea behind genetic memory relies on the belief in past lifetimes. In essence, your body remembers past events because you were there, genetically speaking. The theory is based on the reports of people remembering events from the ancient past that they weren't alive for. They can't explain how they remember, and some people don't remember anything at all, but things seem familiar to them for inexplicable reasons; sometimes this is described as reincarnation, but genetic memory is completely different. None of this has ever been proven, of course." Laura shook her head in bewilderment, realizing the full implication of her words. "If it was true, then we were Forerunners ourselves, once."

"For a human theory, it does make a surprising amount of sense," Cortana put in. "But how did you know about the Monitor, or Halo, or any of that?"

"ONI can't encrypt their files well enough to keep me out, as I said before. I read the mission reports, every single one of them."

As soon as she finished saying this, Laura was whisked away into another memory, this one completely unfamiliar.

"Alaya, how are the tests coming on the Flood infection form?" The voice came from what looked like a Covenant Prophet, and was speaking to someone who looked almost exactly like Laura._

"All I have discovered so far is that they have extremely high threshold tolerances for heat and cold, but can't withstand focused temperature extremes, which we already knew from previous research. It would also appear that they are resistant to any form of poison or disease, if not completely immune. Unfortunately, they also have extremely fragile body structures; continuous testing has killed most of the specimens. Without more test subjects, we won't be able to find a way to stop them before they take over the universe, and the High Council is adamant that we not try to clone any specimens." The young woman raked a hand through her dark hair and sighed heavily. "Thaddeus, I can't think of anything else we can do at this point."

—

She picked up a small electrical device and pointed it at the Prophet. Firing off a short burst just past his head, the young human scientist caught an infection form (which had been sneaking--if that is the proper term--up behind Thaddeus) with the electrical discharge, paralyzing it long enough to put it back into containment.

"Sorry about that. I thought I had secured all the specimen containers."_

"You have been under a lot of stress lately, Alaya, and you are tired. Why do you not get some rest?" The Prophet's voice was quiet and kindly._

"What's the point? If I don't find a way to stop the Flood I'll kill us all. I can't have that on my conscience."_

"If you overwork yourself, you will have failed anyway by killing yourself before you could stop the Flood. Now, go and get some sleep, or rest if nothing else. Besides, I heard that Captain Corin has returned from the front lines for a few days."_

"It's not nice to tease, old one, especially regarding delicate subjects like that."_

"Who said I was teasing?"_

The young scientist left the lab and shed her protective gear, sanitizing herself for safety's sake before leaving the laboratory. Walking into her quarters, she pulled off her clothes and basked in the comfort of a hot shower. When she got out of the shower, however, she was surprised to see a young man (who looked a lot like the Master Chief) sitting in her quarters.

"Corin! What are you doing here?"_

"Am I not allowed to visit my wife every once in a while, my beloved

Alaya?"_

"I wasn't expecting you back for at least another solar year! Is something wrong?"

"We've lost another outer world to the Flood, but most of the colonies have been evacuated, so there's nothing for them to feed on at the moment. I'll have to go back out in a few days, but I can't do anything while the transport ship and my platoons' armor are being repaired, so I decided to spend some quality time with my wife."

"Corin, you know it's not nice to tease." She had a twinkle in her dark eyes when she said this. He didn't say anything else, just smiled at his young wife as he wrapped his arms around her.

The memory went dark, leaving everyone in the room shaken. Laura herself was pale beyond belief, and her hands shook as she tried and failed to remove the device.

"Where did that come from? I've never even imagined anything like that!" Even as she said this, she remembered a nightmare she'd had over a month ago. Forgetting she still had the headset on, she allowed the memory to replay through her mind:

"And you don't know why you dreamed it?"

"No, Mom, I don't know. I don't know who they are, what they are, I just don't know! I've had other dreams like this, and I can't explain it! Am I going mad, Mom? Is it some symptom from my augmentations?"

"Without knowing what your augmentations were, I couldn't say. However, you seem physically and mentally sound, so I wouldn't worry on that count."

"But what does it mean?" Laura sobbed.

"I don't know, Laurabeth, I don't know."

"How long have you been having these dreams of yours?" Cortana's voice jolted Laura out of her reverie. Caught between a rock and a hard place, and completely unable to meet the Spartans' helmeted gaze, she replied, "I'm not really sure. All I know is that I've had about ten of them over the last two years, and I can't explain any of them. Why do you ask?"

"It would appear that your hypotheses might be correct. Apparently, you were one of the leading scientists of the Forerunners in another life. You may have the knowledge of how to stop the Flood in you memories. If we could access it, we could develop weapons to defeat and possibly destroy the Flood."

"Great, just another reason for ONI to try and control me. Never thought I'd live to see the day when I wanted to be ignored. There's got to be a lot more in there, though." Having stopped the trembling of her hands, she pulled off the device and looked at it thoughtfully.

"I remember now, I built this myself long ago, in another lifetime."

The reasons behind it were quite compelling. I had thought to try and retrieve memories to help people suffering from head injuries or other forms of amnesia. Then I thought about transferring memories to other people, important memories that could save a lot of lives. Imagine, giving new soldiers great strategies and survival techniques, new doctors the knowledge to save lives; the possibilities were too good to ignore. This was one of the greatest achievements I ever made. I don't know how I remember, I just do. I can recall several of these being made, but apparently this is the only one that's ever been found. This is one of the most important discoveries we've ever made, we can't lose this."

"Indeed this is a valuable discovery, not only the technological worth, but for the potential insight into Forerunner life, culture, science, and the information on the Flood. This is much too valuable to lose." Laura was silent for a while as she considered all the possibilities, and hit on an idea that seemed worth trying.

"Cortana, do you think you can send this last memory to the Covenant homeworld, at least the important parts?"

"Maybe. Why do you ask?"

"If we could show them the truth, maybe we could end the war. Maybe we could go back to what the Forerunners really intended. I seriously doubt they would have wanted us to be fighting each other. If we showed them, we may be able to broker a truce. It's worth a shot, since we've got nothing else to lose."

"I'll see what I can do, but I wouldn't hope for much. Even if they managed to understand the point of the broadcast, if it ever managed to reach them, they'd probably just dismiss it as a lie cooked up to stop them from massacring us."

"Understandable, but we have to try. If there's even a small chance it will work, I'll take those odds." She lowered her voice, momentarily forgetting the sharpness of the Spartans' ears, and murmured, "If I can save my family, it'll be worth it a thousand times over."

Meanwhile, somewhere on the captured warship, a minor Covenant Prophet was trembling with rage at the heresy he'd seen on the Elite observer's reports of the human intruders. He and his Elite guards had noticed the Engineers converging in one location and had gone to investigate, and had stayed there when they'd heard the reports of Covenant dying in all other locations, with the exception of the Grunts. Having left before the intruders rounded up the Engineers, they had since observed the female human with the knives speak indescribable heresies many times over, especially when she'd donned the Circlet of Holy Memory. Behind the rage, however, was cold fear. What if the Great Prophet of Truth was wrong, and had been all along? What if the strange human who knew the uses of the Forerunner relics was right? Ridiculous! He scoffed to himself. The doubt remained like a cloud of darkness bearing an inescapable doom, however, and couldn't be shaken.

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Chapter Twenty-Two: Alaya's Memories Part I

****November 29, 2552 0536 hours****

****Covenant Warship _Holy Retribution_****

****En route to Sol System****

Linda took the last watch, and was about to wake the Master Chief when she noticed Laura sit up suddenly, reach for her knives, and remember where she was. Dark eyes stared around her for a moment, wide and unfocused, before she pulled herself together. She got up slowly, grabbed something sitting beside her, and left the bridge. Guessing that something was wrong, Linda woke the Chief.

"Sir, Laura's just left the bridge. From the looks of things, she had another of those dreams."

"Where'd she go?" John looked around the bridge. In spite of his helmeted head, Linda could tell he was worried, too worried for it to be mere concern over a fellow teammate. _Something's not quite normal here,_ she thought. _I wonder what he's so worried about._

"No idea. Maybe Cortana knows, but I think it'd be best to give her some time first; she looked pretty upset."

Laura woke up suddenly, reached for her knives, and sat up as soon as she could move; the cold floor of the Covenant bridge brought her back to reality. She'd had another dream, this one too much for her to remember. _This is getting too weird,_ she thought. _If I'm not careful, I'll go insane long before Ackerson kills me off._ The dream was fading too quickly from her memory, but there was a name that rang clear in her mind, a name she'd shouted in the dream: _Marin_. That name rang out clearly, but there was another one that was just as clear: the name _Corin_. For some reason, there were strong feelings attached to both names, but more to the latter than the former. _I need to do some _serious_ reconnaissance here_. The circlet happened to be next to her, for whatever reason. Picking it up, Laura headed off into a side chamber off the bridge of the captured Covenant warship, making sure she was alone. She pulled out the headset and placed it on her head, waiting to see what memories would be revealed.

****&&****

The strike group was pinned down in a box canyon, and the Flood were closing in on all sides. Every one of the soldiers was unnerved by the sight, except for the Elite warriors in the platoon: they continued to fire, singing battle hymns as they shot the Flood to pieces. The group leader, a human named Corin, turned to his second in command, a human officer two years younger than him by the name of Marin.

"Did you call for extraction?"

"Sir, we've been told that extraction is too dangerous, it could spread the Flood to safe zones. We've been ordered to remain

here."

"Damn! They've abandoned us!" A younger soldier was beginning to panic, which earned him a look of reproach from the others. Corin understood, however: the Flood were spreading too quickly. Any steps to prevent or slow the Flood advance were being taken, and unfortunately this was one of them.

"Marin, how are our supplies?"

"We have enough food to last us for two standard weeks, but our ammunition is low. All odds are we'll be dead in less than a day."

"Then let's make it count. All soldiers, do not fire until they get closer; try to aim for the carriers: when they go up they take several Flood with them. That's an order." One look at the Elites was enough to garner obedience, but they looked quite disappointed to have to wait; they enjoyed battle of any kind, but placed a high value on discipline.

Before they could do anything, however, a rounded bar was thrown down in front of them; seconds later a force field went up that incinerated the Flood that came in contact with it. Marin grinned.

"We haven't been totally abandoned yet. Command sent help." He pointed upward, where a figure in combat armor threw down a rope; a closer look revealed a number of green smears on the otherwise pristine armor. None of the soldiers lost any time in climbing to the top of the canyon, where a dropship waited. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough room for everyone, one person had to stay behind.

"Marin, get in. I'll stick around and deal with the Flood."

Before Marin could protest, their strange rescuer took matters into his own hands. Corin felt himself being shoved roughly into the dropship, and the hatch was sealed behind him. One of the Elites got in the pilot's seat, but the navigational controls had been automated and pre-programmed, in effect needing no pilot. As the ship took off, the stranger strapped on a pair of wings, similar to the new aerospace fighter wings that Marin's scientist friend Alaya had been designing, Corin noticed. He leaped off the cliff and glided next to the dropship, firing downward at Flood forms every now and again.

"Whoever this person is, he's got some contacts, Marin. Notice anything about those wings?"

"I think I know who it is, but I hope I'm wrong. I've never wanted to be this wrong before."

"Your friend knows better than to risk everything on a hair-brained rescue mission. She's a scientist, and she knows nothing about combat. I met her once, remember?"

"Alaya and I were both taught how to fight back, and I don't doubt she's been keeping up with our training. But if she's desperate, she won't think, she'll act on impulse. You only met her once, Corin,

I've known her for years, practically since I was born."

They both lurched to the side as the dropship came down at a steep angle, landing in a valley about twenty kilometers away from the box canyon. Their rescuer landed only a couple of minutes behind them, retracting his wings into a surprisingly compact shape. The only other object in the valley was a transport ship, large enough to contain the dropship and several other ships of the same size or smaller. It was plain that the rescue had been well planned. Corin had his doubts, though. _What if the Flood have found this valley? They could be inside the transport right now!_ The other soldiers came to the same conclusion, bringing their weapons to bear. Shortly after, a familiar voice called out, one that both Corin and Marin recognized as belonging to one of the more prominent scientists, a Prophet by the name of Thaddeus.

"All is safe. We must hurry before the Flood arrive."

No one wasted any time boarding the transport; the mysterious stranger took the pilot's seat behind the dropship. Both vessels cleared the atmosphere, and the dropship was expertly maneuvered into the transport ship's docking bay. Marin headed to the cockpit of the dropship, Corin following behind at a discreet distance. The stranger exited and noticed Marin heading toward him.

"You do realize that coming here was reckless? You could face imprisonment for this, or worse, death!"

"At least my conscience is clear, Marin," a woman's voice replied, clear and cold and sharp. The stranger pulled off the armor's helmet to reveal a young woman, about two years older than Marin. She had a rounded face, dark brown hair pulled back into a tight braid that was coiled once around her head, and intense dark eyes: when she spoke, they reflected what she was really thinking. Corin had met Marin's friend Alaya once before, when she was giving them a briefing on some new weaponry to use against the Flood; he had found her to be too intelligent to be worth much in a combat scenario. Now, though, he wasn't so sure. _If she came after us on her own, she must know more than science. Perhaps I was too hasty in my judgments._

"Why did you even come? You're too valuable a scientist to risk losing to the Flood. And how did you talk Thaddeus into it as well?"

"I told the High Council that a rescue was possible, I even showed them how it could be done, but they refused to even consider it. I couldn't bear to leave you behind, Marin: you're all I have left."

"But Thaddeus--"

"Caught me grabbing a transport and insisted on coming along. His arguments were persuasive enough, and I had insurance to protect against the Flood. That forcefield you saw earlier only repels Flood lifeforms. There was one at each entrance of the transport, and they were active until we left the planet's atmosphere. I planned ahead of time before I came after you." She smiled grimly and gestured to the various green smears of Flood blood on her armor, her dark eyes flashing with a fire that Corin never noticed before. "Besides, this gave me the perfect opportunity to test out this prototype combat

skin. I must say, it worked better than any of us _scientists_ had predicted."

"The High Council will not be pleased with you."

"I know, but I had to act. I had to do the right thing. Let me worry about the Council, your head will be unscathed by it, as will Thaddeus'. I'll tell them I acted alone, and I'll be the only one punished." Her voice warmed suddenly, giving it a lilting melody that hadn't been there before. "Don't worry, little brother. As you said, I'm too valuable a scientist to risk the death penalty on." She smiled, but Corin noticed worry in her dark eyes. He also noticed the words 'little brother.' _So Alaya is his sister? I had no idea, but then again, none of us did._ Corin's eyes narrowed in thought. _I'll have to ask Marin about this later; for now, we need to concentrate on getting back to Halo._

They returned to the HALO-4 installation in three minutes, where the High Council had established military operations. There were thousands of the ring-worlds spread throughout the galaxy, and thousands of varied races inhabited them. The HALO stations had been designed originally as science outposts, but the Flood outbreak had caused an increased military presence to be on hand. HALO-4 was considered by many to be the primary ringworld, but that was a false assumption: the High Council had merely chosen as a base it because it was out of the way, safe from the Flood.

As they approached the ring, the ship was hailed.

"Identify for landing clearance."

"Transport vessel TR-07951 requesting permission to dock."

"Transport vessel TR-07951, can you verify no Flood presence aboard?"

"Confirmed, no Flood onboard."

"Transport vessel TR-07951, you are cleared for docking. Stand by for control transfer."

Alaya looked at her friend and fellow scientist. "Thaddeus, I don't want you to be seen. There's no need for you to take the blame for my actions. Keep your head down until the docking bay empties out, then leave quietly. I'll take full responsibility."

"I will not let you fall alone, Alaya. We have both broken the laws, and we shall both bear the penalties. I stand firm in what I have done, as you do."

"There's no sense in both of us taking the blame. If one of us can still do research on the Flood, it'll be worth it. I'll fall alone, and you can find a way to save all of us from the Flood. Besides, it was my idea to save my brother in the first place, so I should be the one to take the fall. No sense in your getting in trouble for my rash behavior."

"The gods have blessed us with intelligence, Alaya my friend, and they will bless us again for the nobility of our actions. I will take

the blame beside you, no matter what." The old Prophet's words were meant to be comforting, but Alaya wasn't reassured.

When the ship docked, Alaya disembarked into the waiting arms of several security guards sent by the High Council. Without even taking notice of Thaddeus or the other soldiers, they whisked her off to a prison cell. Corin noticed that she held her head high even as she was arrested. _She has no fear. Why did I never notice before?_ The answer came just as quickly. _I thought she was beneath my notice when I met her._

Alaya's trial took place fairly quickly; the Council was displeased by her actions, but since she had taken appropriate precautions, and because she was one of their chief scientists and experts on the Flood, the death sentence was commuted. She was sentenced to six months of isolation: no one was to speak or communicate with her in any way, nor could she contact anyone. As she was being led away, Thaddeus rose and addressed the High Council, floating toward them on his antigravity seat. While the scene appeared comical, the old Prophet's voice was quite solemn.

"Council Members, I ask to share in Alaya's punishment, for I too went with her to rescue those soldiers from the Flood. If you punish one, you must punish all."

"Thaddeus, don't do this!" Alaya shouted, but no one heard her above the murmur of astonished voices. Everyone was shocked that a Prophet would step in voluntarily for a human; they were known to be disdainful to races they considered inferior to them, and humans were near the bottom of their list.

"Why do you ask to share in isolation with a human?" One of the Council members, a Prophet himself, directed the question at Thaddeus.

"Because Alaya is one of the greatest humans I have ever known. She has been blessed by the gods with courage and wisdom, and I have been honored to be considered her friend, and would be honored to share in her punishment, though her only crime was compassion."

"Alaya will suffer her punishment alone, Thaddeus," the Council Master, a rule-happy Elite who had risen to the top by his own efforts, declared. He glared at the young woman before him.

"You should be ashamed for sullyng your father's honorable name. Who now will speak of him with honor?"

"I will, if no one else. I have held to what he taught me about honor and decency. When I went after those soldiers you callously abandoned to die, I did exactly as he would have done, for that is what he taught us to do: the right thing. At least I suffer in clear conscience." Head high, she walked out of the council chambers to her cell, not looking back at the astonished faces behind her or at the admiring glances of soldiers and some of the council members. Corin heard hushed whispers as he left the council chamber, and listened.

"What did he mean by disgracing her father's name?"

"Who was her father?"

"Our father was General Petrarch, one of the greatest military heroes that ever lived," came Marin's voice, clear and cold. Corin turned to see him leaving the council chamber, heading for the whisperers. Most of these were surprised, as Corin had been, to learn that Marin and Alaya were siblings; Marin was a well-known and highly decorated soldier, while Alaya was a fairly obscure scientist whose prominence was only just growing. Now that he knew the truth, Corin noticed a resemblance in the dark eyes, dark hair, and slender build. Corin watched as Marin began to speak, his voice cold and his eyes flashing.

"One of the most important lessons we learned from him was never to leave a friend or fellow soldier behind. She came after us because the Council refused to, risking everything to bring us home, and now she is locked up and disgraced for doing the right thing, as our father taught us. If you are to whisper in the shadows, at least know the truth first." There was anger in his eyes that Corin had never seen before. _Of course, with the Council Master condemning her and accusing her of disgracing their father's good name, he has good reason to be angry. They treated her poorly in there, and he had to see that._

"Marin, I'm sorry you had to see that."

"Sir, request permission to speak with Thaddeus the Prophet."

"You can try, but why would he talk to you?"

"For my sister's sake, he may; he's looked after us ever since our father died. Alaya had just started working with him when he came to stand beside us at the funeral; he's advised us ever since, and he may be able to help now. There has to be a way to reduce the severity of her sentence, if only because of her research on the Flood. He may be able to find a way to help her. I have to try."

"If there's anything I can do to help, Marin, let me know. She definitely would have made a good soldier, if she wasn't so smart."

"She actually wanted to be a soldier, but Father wouldn't hear of it. He wanted Alaya to be a scientist. It was also our mother's last wish before she died: she couldn't refuse that. Despite what any of them said, my sister is an honorable person, even if she's a bit reckless at times."

"Well, then, let's go talk to Thaddeus. Count me in."

"Sir?"

"Your sister impressed me in there with her bearing, especially when she told off the Council. Besides, she saved all our lives, the least I can do is try and help to reduce her sentence." _She's definitely a more interesting person than I had assumed_, he thought to himself. _I must get to know her better._

Alaya kept her isolation as ordered, not communicating with anyone, and not receiving communications from the many people thanking her for bringing friends and family members home to them. She did feel disappointed that she couldn't at least continue her research on the

Flood. _I don't even need to do the lab work, I could just do equations! Why won't they at least let me do that?_ She was fuming about that one day when one of the Council members came to her cell.

"The High Council has been contacted by several members of the scientific community, asking that we commute your sentence of isolation. Their requests have been based on your extensive knowledge of the Flood."

"I have been studying the Flood for some time, yes. Shortly before I went to save those soldiers, I had discovered the presence of regenerative genes in the Flood's physiology. I'd been trying to synthesize them in the hopes of improving medical technologies, but had been as yet unsuccessful. I'd also made extensive notes on their body structure, and on what could be effective at stopping them; unfortunately, I haven't been able to continue my research of late. I'd be glad to do some of the research during my isolation. Even if I could just do 'primitive' long-hand paper equations, I could at least do something useful rather than sit here and stagnate."

"Several of the council members are in favor of commuting your sentence in order for you to continue your research."

"No. That is out of the question. It would be dishonorable to use my status as a scientist to evade punishment. There is another option that the council may consider, however. Have one scientist leave research materials, plain equations and the like, and I will occupy myself with them. He need not even speak to me; thus I could still continue my sentence and be of some benefit in the research on the Flood."

"Most people would simply accept the commutation."

"I am not most people. My father taught me to be honorable, remember? To use my skills to evade punishment is less than dishonorable." Her dark eyes flashed. "If I can even tie loose ends together, it will be enough. No one need ever speak to me, and I can still do some good while honoring the wishes of the High Council."

"I will see what can be done." On his way out, the council member looked hard at Alaya. He had been one in favor of her death for her transgressions, but now wondered why he had been: there was a kind of nobility about the young scientist he had missed before. Still, there was one thing on his mind, a question that needed to be answered.

"Alaya, why did you go after those soldiers?"

"To save my brother. He's all I have left, now that both my father and mother have passed beyond. I promised to take care of him, just as he promised to take care of me. I couldn't abandon him to the Flood as callously as you would have, because that would have meant breaking a promise made to a dying man."

&&

Laura shook her head after the memory faded, trying to clear it a little. _Whoa, that was unexpected. I wonder where she got those wings._ No sooner had the thought passed through her head than a new

memory surfaced.

****&&****

Alaya watched the skies, scanning the clouds for wind direction and possible changes in weather; nearby, several scientists were monitoring wind currents, temperatures, and weather conditions. The condensed wings on her back felt heavy, but it was nothing she couldn't handle. Thaddeus noticed her fidgeting impatiently and floated over, his antigravity harness causing him to bob up and down and bringing a smile to Alaya's face.

"I see you are eager to begin the test on the new wing design."

"Of course I am. How soon can I go?"

"As soon as we receive permission and clearance, you may begin." There was a bit of worry in the old Prophet's dark eyes. "Alaya, are you sure this is wise? If the mechanisms fail, there would be no way to stop your descent."

"You worry too much, old one. I've planned ahead on this." She indicated a web-like harness around the bodysuit she was wearingâ€"an antigravity belt, one specially designed to keep heavy objects airborne for transport. Thaddeus nodded and turned to the rest of the scientists. As he did so, Alaya heard a voice call her name, and turned to see Marin and his captain, and most of his squad, approaching the cliff where they waited.

"Marin, I wasn't expecting you. Come to see the show?"

"Actually I came to keep an eye on my sister, and make sure she doesn't get into trouble."

"So you even brought armed guards just in case? How thoughtful," she teased lightly, hiding the rapidly building nerves which she attributed to the day's activities. _It's just a test flight, how bad can it be?_ At that moment, one of the scientists shouted that they were ready to begin.

"So, what exactly are you going to be doing?" Corin asked.

Alaya looked at him shrewdly, a sly smile on her face. "Defying gravity."

Getting up a good running start, she leaped off the edge of the cliff face, fell for five seconds, and activated the wings; they slid out of their condensed, boxy form, elongated to full length, and Alaya felt herself soaring as they caught the wind. _Oh, it's so wonderful, so magical._ At that moment, she felt free, like she could do anything.

"Data sensors recording. Begin testing when ready." The voice from the wireless transceiver jarred Alaya back to her task, and she began the test runs in earnest. She started with simple turns, banking left and right to see how well the airfoils handled.

"Turning and banking seems a little slow, but overall it looks good. Let's see how the new design handles climbing," Alaya spoke into the transceiver, her voice quivering with excitement. "Can you find me a

thermal air current anywhere?"

"Turn and head twelve units to your right." Alaya did as instructed, and found herself climbing upwards. She quickly put the wings into a climbing position, and began to climb upward on the thermal.

"Unfortunately, we cannot properly simulate a climb without putting an engine on the wings," Thaddeus's voice broke in.

"No, but a thermal is good enough for the moment," Alaya pointed out with a slight smile on her face; Thaddeus rarely did much besides complain, and she sometimes wondered if he enjoyed complaining. "I'll more than make up for it in a moment." As soon as she said this, she went into a steep dive.

Alaya felt the thrill of the dive almost as soon as she began it. She skimmed over a beach, allowing the surf to mist her face as she glided over the water. _This is what freedom feels like,_ she thought just before she came out of the dive.

"All right, the new design handles dives quite nicely," she shouted over the sound of the waves. "I need another thermal."

Heading in the direction the scientists indicated, Alaya felt the rising air currents and decided to put the wings through their paces as she had wanted to before. She put her well-learned flight skills to task, and did a number of barrel rolls and tight turns before Thaddeus came back on the transceiver.

"The data you have acquired is most excellent, Alaya. Please return to the cliff so we can depart and run through the results."

"Must I?" Alaya murmured, more than a hint of regret lacing her voice.

"Yes, Alaya. Never fear, there will be other opportunities."

With a sigh of regret that could be heard by the other scientists, Alaya banked towards the cliff and landed gracefully, retracting the wings as she did so.

Corin had felt his heart leap into his throat for inexplicable reasons when Alaya had jumped, until he saw her fly upward with the wings outstretched. Moving closer to the scientists, he caught snatches of conversation as Alaya ran through various tests to determine the effectiveness of the new design. _She handles flight well_, he thought. _Of course, I should have known that when she flew that dropship after she rescued us from the Flood._ A few rolls and dives later, Alaya landed back on the cliff and the wings condensed to their compacted form; what caught Corin's eyes more than the wings was the expression of pure delight on her normally solemn face.

24. Chapter 23: Alaya's Memories II

Sorry, this one's kinda long! The Muse attacked with a sledgehammer, and I lost. Anyways, enjoy! Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Alaya's Memories Part II

****November 29, 2552 0712 hours****

****Covenant Warship _Holy Retribution_****

****En route to Sol System****

The wing trials over, Laura smiled to recall the feeling of freedom Alaya had felt; she wished she could know what that felt like. _Ironical that the captain's presence bothered her, though, she thought. _I wonder why._

****&&****

Corin watched the activity in the medical wing from an observation lounge. Half of his men had been decimated by the Flood, and most of those who remained had been placed in stasis to keep them alive. Marin was one of the worst injured, and the doctors saw no hope for his recovery. _How am I going to tell his sister?_ Corin's respect for Alaya had grown over the past several months, for reasons he didn't quite understand. His worries were increased, however, when Alaya burst into the medical wing, with a sealed box in her hands and a desperate look on her face.

"Marin! How is he? Is he going to recover?"

"Alaya, it doesn't look good. The doctors can do nothing for his injuries." Corin's voice was soft, trying to calm her; it did no good.

"They can't, but I can. I need to speak to them and to the Council, at once. I may have found a way to save them all, but we must act soon."

Alaya was exhausted but relieved that the Council had approved her plan, reckless though it seemed. She had finally isolated the DNA in the Flood organism that provided the creatures with regenerative capabilities, and had managed to extract it from one of the infection forms in the lab. If her plan worked, she could save all the wounded soldiers, and more, but it was risky: there wasn't enough of the gene to go to every soldier, nor time to create more of it, so the fastest way to distribute the gene would be via infection form.

"Council members, I know the risks, but I am confident I can prevent the full mutation. If you will hear me out at least, perhaps I can explain my reasons."_

"Very well, Alaya, make your case, but be quick."_

"The Flood mutate an organism by forcing a match between nervous systems. If I introduce the infection form to a potential host with a 'chaotic' nervous system, the Flood will be unable to force a match and be rejected by the host."_

"And how do you propose this 'chaotic' nervous system be constructed?"_

"Perhaps through mild electrical shocks, exposure to certain drugs,

or simulated radiation exposure, all of which can be done and reversed easily enough. We may not need that even: as wounded as some of these soldiers are, the Flood may be unable to make use of them."_

"The risk is still there, as is the risk of the Flood spreading."

"Then seal me in the room alone with the patient and the Flood. I promise you it will go no farther, if it fails. I'm willing to take the risk, if it means I can save lives."

She had won out, and so they agreed to let her try. Marin was the first choice, but she refused to do anything to him without his permission. As she approached the bed, he opened his eyes weakly.

"Alaya. I'm not going to make it, am I?"

"Marin, there may be a way, but it's risky. If I can introduce a special Flood gene into your system--"

"I heard the debate, you were shouting quite loudly." He smiled, but the pain was clear on his face. "Do what you have to, Alaya, I trust you."

"Very well, Marin. Forgive me."

She placed a syringe to the back of his neck and gave him an injection which effectively scrambled his nervous system, then strapped him down securely to the bed. She then opened the strange box and allowed a Flood infection form to leap at Marin. Her hand shook, but not enough to affect the aim she was taking at the Flood on her brother's neck with an unusual electrical device, and a few tears ran down her face. Corin noticed her tears, and wondered how she could bear to do this thing to her own brother.

"She has no choice," the voice of Thaddeus came from behind. "Alaya cares too much for her brother to think clearly, yet somehow she has managed. If this works, it may save thousands more lives."

"And if it doesn't she will have killed her own brother for nothing! How could she do this?"

"Marin would have died anyway; his injuries were far too severe to be healed. I have seen her notes, and I think she has done the right thing. Her plan may very well work, if she can keep her head."

Meanwhile, Alaya watched helplessly as the Flood form tried to enter her brother's body. She monitored the activity in his neural system, watching as the Flood tried to force a match with the host. She barely looked up from the monitors in time to see the form detach itself from Marin's body and leap at her; standing her ground, she fired a short electrical burst which caught the Flood in mid-air. It fell to the floor, paralyzed, and Alaya quickly dropped it into a containment box and sealed it tightly. She opened a communications link with the council members in a nearby observation lounge.

"It's done. The Flood DNA has been transferred, and now all we can do

is wait, and hope. I'll stay and keep an eye on him, if you wish."

"Very well, Alaya. In the meantime, the doctors will try to reproduce more of the extracted Flood genome to administer to other patients."

Alaya nodded in assent, and turned back to her brother. Corin looked hard at Thaddeus.

"Why is she so devoted to Marin? I've heard a number of rumors saying she is his lover, but I know that is not true. Why this insane devotion?"

"When their mother, Faraâ€"a well-respected doctor and scientist--died, General Petrarch raised them alone. He knew he would die sooner than expected, from the incurable cancer." Corin bowed his head, knowing the pain that Petrarch must have gone through. Thaddeus continued, "By the time he began to die, Alaya had become a capable enough scientist, and had just started to make a name for herself in the scientific community. She was only twenty years old when I began to work with her; we were designing a new combat armor system for the soldiers. I remember thinking how young she was, and how intelligent for such a young age; once I realized her family background, however, I was not surprised. I accompanied her to her father's deathbed, and heard her promise to take care of Marin, even though there is only two years between them in age. Alaya has tried to keep that promise, and so far has succeeded. If she fails now, it may be disastrous for everyone."

"What do you mean?"

"Her brother is what keeps her finding new ways to combat the Flood. She would much rather be creating medicines and tools to stop them, and not weapons to destroy them. Should Marin die, she would feel she has failed in her duties, and perhaps give up on her research, or worse, pursue it only for revenge. Her knowledge of the Flood is extensive, partly due to her intuition and training as a soldier; losing it would set us far behind, and perhaps cause us to lose the war. Alaya is a kindly young woman with a good heart, but she feels her honor and duty too deeply. It may kill her in the end."

Corin kept his opinions to himself, but continued to think about the new mystery that was Alaya. Then he happened to glance down into the medical wing, where a number of scientists and doctors had gathered around Alaya, congratulating her on her discovery.

"It seems he'll make it. I'm seeing improvement in his condition already. Well done Alaya!"

"It will only be well done when Marin wakes. Please, let him heal in peace. I don't want your accolades, I just want my brother back." At the sound of the pain in her voice, the others left the room, leaving Corin standing by the doorway alone. He had started down when he saw the crowd, and arrived just in time to hear her parting words. Alaya looked around and saw him standing there, but found for some reason that she couldn't look him in the face. When she spoke, she turned her head away.

"He should be fine, I doubt the Flood was able to force a match in

time."

"At the moment, it's not Marin I'm worried about." Her dark head came up sharply. Corin noticed that her normally crisp appearance, something he'd found quite annoying, was now disheveled: her dark hair, normally pulled back tightly from her face, had begun to come loose and drift around her face, the end result making her look younger and more vulnerable. He also noticed worry in her dark eyes, and guessed that not all of it was for her brother. It was all he could do to not take her in his arms and comfort her.

"What do you mean by that? Explain yourself!"

"I'm not sure what I mean myself. All I know for sure is that I'm worried about you." His dark eyes flashed, and Alaya felt a chill run down her spine at what she saw, but strangely enough, it wasn't fear she felt.

"By now you must know I've come to respect you, especially now that you've saved all my men a second time. But if you keep trying to push yourself beyond human limits, it will be worse for all of us. Do you understand?" He placed a hand on her arm, and she pulled away in surprise, which she tried to hide with cold disdain; Corin made her uneasy for some reason.

"I understand that you're not telling me the whole truth, Captain Corin. You speak the same way Thaddeus does when he tells me I'm pushing myself too hard, but the tremor in your voice says you're holding something back." Alaya was afraid of what the answer might be, and tried to walk away. _He only cares for your weapons designs and the ways you can save his soldiers_, she tried to convince herself, but the thought rang hollow. A stirring in the medical bed brought her swiftly to Marin's side.

"Marin, how do you feel? Are you alright?"

"Alaya, whatever you did, thank you. I feel stronger now, but tired."

"Then rest, little brother. I'll leave you be."

"Perhaps to be with a lover?" Marin's eyes twinkled mischievously. "I happen to know someone who thinks very highly of you." Neither Marin nor Alaya noticed Corin flush at that remark.

"Then that someone must have his head examined. No one could care for me in that fashion. I'll forgive your words because of your disorientation from extreme pain. Get some rest."

Marin closed his eyes, and Alaya shook her head in worry. _If he sleeps too long, he'll never wake up_. She continued to monitor his lifesigns, trying desperately to ignore Corin's presence.

"Why are you so worried?"

"Marin is all I have left. You probably don't understand, but if anything were to happen to him, I'd be nothing but another scientist, and worse, a failure and disgrace to my father's teachings. I can't bear to lose him."

Corin understood too well, since he'd finally met someone he couldn't live without. He drew closer, and this time Alaya didn't pull away. She forced herself to look in his eyes, and saw something in them she didn't recognize at first. When she did recognize it, it frightened her, and she turned away again. Corin refused to let her run so easily; catching her arm, he gently but firmly held her in place.

"Do you really think it impossible for me to feel anything for you, Alaya?" The subtle emphasis indicated he wasn't just calling Alaya by her name.

"I think your feelings are misplaced. Surely there are others better suited for someone like you. Why chase after a scientist, and an obscure one at that? Or is it my father's name that draws you?" She couldn't hide the fear anymore, but the longing she felt showed through beneath it.

"I began to respect you before I learned who your father was, and even more so when I saw how you took the isolation ordered by the High Council. Your devotion to your brother was the final thing that drew me to you in the end, and I refuse to deny it now. As far as your obscurity goes, you've become more famous than you realize, ever since you defied the Council to save us. Be that as it may, I feel something for you, and any obscurities or flaws mean nothing to me. Alaya, do you truly feel nothing for me?"

"My feelings are my own, for now. If you truly care--and I doubt highly that you do--you will leave me be. Until this is over, I cannot feel anything for anyone."

"Why do you doubt me? What will convince you I'm telling the truth?"

"If you still feel something when this war is over. Perhaps your heart is misdirected because of my skills in designing weapons." _I don't doubt his heart, but it's mine I don't trust. I can't love him, because if I did it would hurt too much to lose him._

Corin left the room, finally giving up. When he looked back, he saw Alaya bending over a countertop, shoulders shaking in grief as she cried quietly. _So she does feel something, but why go to such trouble to drive me away? Unless she's afraid of what she feels?_ He decided to ask Thaddeus more, next time he saw the old Prophet.

It had been six months since Alaya had procured the life-saving Flood genome, and thousands of lives had been saved by the discovery: not only critically wounded soldiers, but patients with diseases that couldn't be healed. Even the incurable cancer succumbed to the genome, and her research had led to numerous scientific and medical breakthroughs. Unfortunately, she was less pleased with the accolades heaped on her, and more worried about her brother, and about another face which haunted her thoughts. It had been six months since she'd heard from him, and her greatest fear was that he was dead. Over time, she became quiet and taciturn, something which was not lost on Thaddeus.

"Alaya, what is it that worries you?"

"I'm worried about my brother, Thaddeus. It's been so long since I've

heard from him. Do you think he's all right?"

"In these times, nothing is certain. Yet I think it is something more than Marin which occupies your thoughts. Is this so?"

"You speak in riddles, old one," she smiled. It was an old joke between them, the difference between their ages.

"Perhaps there is someone else you fear for." The old Prophet's deep eyes looked knowingly at her.

"What makes you so sure, Thaddeus? I cannot love anyone besides my brother, that you've known for years. How could all that change so quickly?" Alaya's voice was light, but both of them knew she was trying to hide something.

"It does not always take a long time to love, Alaya. In some cases, one can fall in love in only a few heartbeats. I know of one who did, but the one he loved feared him too much. He left after a time to prove himself."

"You're speaking in riddles again, old one." Her tone sharpened, because the Prophet had struck a nerve that was quite tender yet.

"Then I shall speak plainer. Corin loves you, and you love him, but you fear something and so rejected him. Now he has gone to prove he loves you, by leaving you alone as you asked. You are pining for him, but refuse to admit it."

"You hit near the mark, Thaddeus, but not in the center. I don't doubt his heart, but mine. If I were to love him, it would hurt too much to lose him, and my duties would never allow it. In any case, it's too late now; he's gone, and I cannot get him back. I must wait for his return, and hope he still cares enough for me. Yet whether he does or not, I cannot be bound to him or to any man." Alaya felt it her duty to guard her younger brother, and wrongly felt that to do so meant she must give up her own wishes. She knew her duty, but Thaddeus felt that more often than not misinterpreted what needed to be done.

She was still speaking when a doctor rushed in, a frantic look on his face.

"Alaya, Thaddeus, come quickly. We need your help."

Both of them rushed after the doctor to a medical laboratory, where several doctors were trying to restrain a struggling soldier. The soldier's face was covered in a strange mucus, and there was an infection form attempting to insert itself into the soldier's neck; by the looks of things, it had been there for some time. Alaya seized a scalpel and threw it dead-on: it hit the infection form and exploded it into feathery pieces. The soldier was finally sedated, and Alaya recognized the face, ravaged though it was.

"Marin!"

She rushed to the side of the bed and began to look him over; it was even more evident that the infection form had been attached for a long time, and the process of mutation had already begun by the time

she'd arrived. She looked at the other soldiers standing around.

"What happened? Tell me exactly what happened!"

One of the soldiers spoke up, his voice hesitant: "We'd pulled out of a planet that had been overrun by the Flood, and jumped for Halo as soon as we'd cleared the atmosphere. We were checking the compartments for Flood when it jumped at the captain. Marin got in its way, and we couldn't get it off him without risking killing him. The captain ordered us to sedate him until we could get here. None of us dared to try and kill it."

"It would have been better if you'd tried to kill it directly," Alaya tried to soften her tone; the poor soldiers had already been through hell and worse. "Maybe there was no real harm done, but we can't be sure. We'll have to wait and watch. Give me a weapon, and then find the High Council. They must be told immediately. Clear the room and seal it behind you--don't let anyone else in here, no matter what."

When Thaddeus and the soldiers had left, Alaya kept a close eye on what had once been her brother. She knew somehow that the mutation was too far gone to be reversed, but she still hoped that she was wrong. Putting aside the weapon she had been left with, Alaya began to operate on Marin, in an attempt to try and reverse the process of mutation. She strapped him down and carefully cut open the chest, stopping when she saw what resided within. Her voice trembled as she relayed her findings to those observing her and the mutated Marin in the laboratory.

"There's a Flood infection form within his body, or at least a portion of an infection form. The mutation process is too far along; I can't reverse it, even if I knew where to begin."

The creature that had once been her brother Marin came awake suddenly, thrashing about violently in an attempt to break free. Alaya moved closer to the struggling form, hoping against all things to still find some part of her brother Marin within the grotesque Flood form before her.

"Marin?" Alaya spoke softly, hoping to try and connect with her brother. The creature snapped its head in her direction, and made a number of inarticulate noises. For a brief moment, Alaya was sure she saw the Flood mouth the words Alaya, please kill me, but the moment passed, leaving behind a snarling, degenerate creature.

"Alaya, he is not your brother anymore."

Before Thaddeus could continue speaking over the intercom, the Flood combat form that had once been Marin broke free and leaped at her. Alaya pushed herself out of the way, dodging the thing's flailing limbs as she made her way to the intercom.

"Seal the lab!" she shouted, and the doors shut and locked. She was trapped with the Flood, and her chances of survival were slender. Constantly running away, she ran back to the weapon she had discarded and grabbed it, prepared to fire on her own brother.

Corin and the other soldiers in Marin's platoon watched helplessly as

Alaya began to fire at the Flood combat form, missing as the thing jumped at her and forced her to dodge.

"This is insane! She'll be killed!" one of the younger soldiers shouted.

"Maybe not." Corin nodded as Alaya lost her grip on the weapon and turned to take the Flood form head-on. Strike, block, counter, all the self-defense and hand-to-hand combat techniques the soldiers were taught were being used by the young scientist. He knew, however, that Alaya would only prolong the inevitable; with the High Council behind him, he went down to the laboratory to render assistance.

Alaya dodged a strike from the creature and lost her grip on the weapon she'd been left with; she was now trying to fight for her life, alone and unarmed. Calling to mind the lessons her father had taught her on close combat, she tried to block the Flood's attacks. A brief misstep on her part caused her to be hit by the thing's disgusting semi-mutation of an arm, which sent her flying against a wall. As the Flood leapt at her, Alaya slipped out of the way and lunged for the weapon lying on the ground. She managed to get a grip on it just before the thing attacked; dodging again, she stumbled and the creature lunged, aiming for her throat. She raised her arm to deflect the attack and the Flood sank its jaws into her arm, biting deeply into unprotected flesh. She cried out in pain and whacked its head with the weapon she was holding; it staggered back and she shot it several times in the chest, watching it collapse.

"Alaya, are you all right?"

"Don't worry about me, old one. Are you well, after watching that?"

"I am fine, but you are hurt. Look out!"

When Alaya had turned her back, the Flood had gotten up and leaped at her; a round of weapons fire exploded the creature's torso outward in chunks of wet flesh. Corin stood in the doorway, with his soldiers and the High Council behind him, a fire burning in his dark eyes. As he swept the room for other Flood, more from habit than anything else, he noticed Alaya in a heap on the floor, and Alaya's bleeding arm and battered figure: her clothes were torn and bloody, and her hair had come loose and was hanging limply around her head. What caught his attention most was her face: there was nothing but bleak despair in her eyes as she tried to go to the body of what had once been her brother Marin, putting her hand on its arm as if in apology, her blood mingling with that of the Flood. Disregarding all protocols and ignoring the shocked looks of his unit, he went to her; she didn't even protest as he wrapped her in his arms.

"What happened? Alaya?"

"I failed. Marin is dead because of me. I killed him." Her head began to spin, and she passed out from grief and loss of blood, no longer conscious of the council asking questions or of Corin's arms tightening around her limp frame.

Alaya woke two hours later, her arm bandaged and her head swimming. _What happened? The last thing I remember was being called to the medical bays and— oh Marin!_ Full memory came flooding back in a

rush, and she wept to realize the full magnitude of her failure. She barely even noticed the door opening, but when she felt a pair of strong arms around her she turned and pressed her face into Corin's chest. He didn't even protest as she cried against him, knowing just how she felt: Marin had been his closest friend as well as his second-in-command. Alaya wept for five minutes before realizing her situation.

"Captain! Forgive me! I didn't realize--"

"There's nothing to forgive, Alaya. He was my friend as well as your brother." Corin didn't trust himself to say more, but he didn't need to; Alaya clung to him, afraid to let go. _Please, don't let me lose him, too._

"I failed him, Corin. I let him die. If I had been quicker getting there, maybe I could have saved him." Her tears flowed even harder as she choked out the words.

"The failure was mine, I should have thought to kill the Flood sooner. You didn't fail in your duty, you did the best you could. Your father would be proud of you."

Alaya couldn't bear to think of it. Her grief and guilt were too great for anyone to assuage. _Oh, Marin, forgive me. I failed you._ Corin seemed to guess what she was thinking. Besides, he had another duty to perform.

"Alaya, Marin asked me to pass on a message, before the Flood took over entirely. He said, 'Tell my sister not to feel guilty over this. She kept her promise better than I kept mine.' He made me swear I'd tell you that."

"And how do I know you're not just telling me what I want to hear?"

"Any of the other soldiers will tell you the same thing. They just won't keep the other half of the promise as well as I will. Marin asked me to take care of you for him. He must have known I'd do it anyway, but he made me promise before we lost him altogether."

"Your promise was in vain. I can care for myself, long enough to do what needs to be done."

"So you plan to take revenge on the Flood?" Her head shot up at this. "Thaddeus guessed this might happen, if Marin died. He feared all along that you'd seek revenge, and it seems he was right."

"Marin was all I had left!" She was shouting in her despair, having extricated herself from his embrace, blind to the truth that lay in front of her. "Without him, what reason do I have to survive? What's left in this entire galaxy for me? All that remains is revenge!" Her grief was blinding her, and she furiously blinked back tears, trying to keep her distance from Corin, the one person she wanted to be with most, but feared to be with because she could so easily lose him.

Corin grabbed her by her uninjured arm and swung her in front of him; his dark eyes were blazing with a fire that Alaya had never seen before. Alaya opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't get the words

out: Corin kissed her hard and passionately, taking her by surprise, leaving her breathless. When he stopped and spoke to her again, his voice was dark with passion and emotion.

"I tried to tell you before, but you refused to listen, for whatever reason. I'm telling you again, I love you. I began to respect you when you saved our lives the first time, and over time that grew into something unexpected. No matter what you say, I love you, and I know you feel something for me, no matter how you try to deny it. And yet you say there's nothing left for you but revenge?" He tenderly brushed a strand of dark hair out of her eyes. "Do you truly feel nothing for me, Alaya? Or are you afraid to lose me like you lost Marin?"

"I do love you, Corin, but I cannot have you. I'm a scientist, you're a soldier, and that's something that can never be changed. As long as this war is continuing, we can never be together, and I'll always be afraid of losing you." Her voice broke, and tears began to run down her face.

"Is it not better to love and lose, than to not have anything at all?" Corin's words sank deeply, and Alaya didn't need to answer. She clung to him again, her embrace saying everything she couldn't. Corin kissed her again, gently this time, holding her quietly in his arms, offering freely the comfort she had been afraid to take before. Alaya rested her head against his throat, her eyes closed, feeling his warmth penetrating her clothing and her skin. Corin gently raised her face to his, looking deeply in her eyes.

"If only the timing had been better, my love, I would bind myself to you in a heartbeat. But we must wait until Marin is laid to rest."

"I would have insisted on it, Corin. Marin was my life for many years, and he was the only family I had. I couldn't abandon him now."

"I'm sure he would wish you to be happy, Alaya. Otherwise, he wouldn't have made me promise to take care of you."

They stayed that way for some time, neither caring about anything but their own grief and sudden joy, finding comfort in each other. The only one who saw them together was Thaddeus, who guessed at once what had happened, and left the two lovers be.

The memorial service was held that night, with the setting of the sun behind Threshold. Alaya made her way back to her quarters, stumbling with grief and weariness. Many people had turned out to pay tribute to a fallen warrior, and had been surprised to discover he had had a sister; she had been lavished with false sympathies and transparent kindnesses, mostly from people who wanted the attention, since she was not as well known as Marin had been. By the time she entered, she wanted nothing more than to rest. However, when she turned on the lights, she was surprised to find Corin sitting in her quarters waiting for her.

"Corin, what are you doing here?"

"I didn't think you'd want to be alone. Besides, we both need some comfort tonight." He wrapped his arms around her, and she no longer

protested as he held her close and kissed her. All weariness vanished in an instant with his kisses, and she relaxed into his embrace. He swung her into his arms and carried her into her bedroom.

"What will they say when they find out?"

"Alaya, my love, I doubt anyone will say anything, since no one even knows I'm here. Besides, I intend to have you as my bride soon enough, so it doesn't matter." He smiled kindly at her as he laid her down in the bed and settled himself down beside her. Alaya pressed her body next to his, feeling his warm embrace and welcoming it for the first time with open arms. He kissed her softly, tenderly, comforting her even as he held her in his arms. Having spent countless passionate nights with willing women, Corin was surprised at how easily he could give this kind of comfort, the exact opposite of what he knew. He knew there would probably be some awkward questions to answer later, but all that mattered was the woman beside him, a woman he now knew he couldn't bear to live without.

Neither one of them got much sleep that night. They found comfort in each other's arms, and took full measure of their time together.

&&

The memory vanished in an instant, and Laura pulled off the headset, her hands trembling from what she'd seen. In a short time, she had learned much about the Flood, the Forerunners, and the technology they had left behind. The information about the Flood mutation techniques was familiar; Laura recalled seeing it during one of her hacks into ONI's database, and obviously the Forerunners knew about it as well. _If the Forerunners knew how the Flood mutated their hosts, why couldn't they counter it?_ She banished the thought for later consideration, but almost immediately a new one surfaced. _I wonder if other humans have memories like mine. The only way to find out would be to use this on other humans, which ONI would never allow, the shortsighted scumbags._ Things were so much clearer now, but there were some things that weren't. _In another life, I loved him and he loved me. Is that why I love him now, and why I continue to hope? Or do I love him for my own reasons, not from a subconscious desire?_ Her muddled thoughts were interrupted when the Master Chief entered the room. He didn't have his helmet on, and Laura noticed the scowl on his face. _So handsome, even though he's pissed off,_ she smiled inwardly, careful not to let her feelings show. _I wonder how he'd look if he smiled, probably irresistible._

"Cortana told me I'd find you here. You know it's dangerous to wander off like that, the ship isn't secure yet."

"I'll take my chances. Even with my head as muddled as it is, I could still take on an Elite." She held out the device. "Care to try it out?"

The Master Chief put on the headset, and Laura adjusted the sizing to fit; he felt a thrill run down his spine as her fingers brushed against his temple. The next thing he knew, the room faded out.

&&

Corin walked down the hallways of the residence, looking for a certain set of living quarters, and found a door that matched Marin's description. He knocked twice, and the door opened to reveal a slightly surprised Alaya. Clearly she wasn't expecting any visitors: her hair hadn't been pulled back in its usual braid and was drifting carelessly around her face, and her clothes were wrinkled and showed a decent amount of wear. She looked nothing like a scientist at the moment: in fact, she looked highly attractive in something other than a pristine lab coat.

"Captain Corin, I wasn't expecting you! Please, come in. I expect you're worried about my brother."

"Actually, I came by to thank you for your work. Without your efforts, all my surviving men would have died." He sat down in a comfortable chair and watched as Alaya poured herself a steaming drink; the odor was surprisingly and soothingly pleasant, and Corin remembered Marin saying that his sister used herbal teas and extracts to help her think.

"Would you care for something to drink? I doubt you'd want this, but I have other things."

"No, actually, I'm all right."

"I spoke with the doctors earlier this morning; according to them, Marin and the others will be out of action for a few more weeks yet. It was touch and go with some of them yesterday, but the Flood genome appears to be working with no ill effects."

"That's very good to hear. I think we all needed a bit of rest anyway."

As Alaya took her now-empty cup to the dining area, Corin looked around at the living quarters: in pride of place on one wall was a holographic picture of Alaya and her family. He saw the resemblance to General Petrarch, but also noticed that Alaya took after the woman in the picture a lot more; he recognized the woman as Fara, whose medical breakthroughs were known everywhere (even amongst the military), but whose kindly nature had eventually destroyed her after she'd contracted a deadly disease. Slightly to the picture's left was an ornately decorated stand, holding a small, harp-like musical instrument. _Of course, for festivals and high days she always dances with the minstrels_, he thought as he recalled a recent festival; he smiled to recall the way her fingers had caressed the strings as her lithe form (clad in a simple, flowing green gown) moved gracefully in the dance, and suddenly wished he could feel that same delicate touch on his body. Turning his eyes to another area, in an attempt to take his mind off things that couldn't be, he saw a pair of sparring blades on a table.

"You're trained in hand-to-hand combat?"

"My father thought it was a good idea for us to learn to defend ourselves. I actually find it quite useful to keep in shape and help alleviate stress. Perhaps you've noticed a number of young privates using the sparring rooms lately?" When he nodded, she smiled slyly. "I've been using a holographic generator to change my appearance. Marin seems convinced that the other soldiers wouldn't take kindly to seeing a scientist around all the time, so I found a way to satisfy

us both."

"Perhaps." Corin picked up one of the sparring blades, a blunted knife that was good for practice but useless to cut anything. "Care to try me?"

Alaya moved surprisingly quickly, managing to catch him off guard and knock the blade out of his hands. _Not bad, for a scientist_, Corin thought. He blocked, counter-blocked, and lunged, Alaya matching his every maneuver. Her lithe form slipped behind him, and he turned and managed to pin her to the wall. His arms were on either side, effectively blocking her escape, but she seemed too stunned to even try. Neither of them moved for several minutes, and Corin sensed an undercurrent of emotion in the room.

Alaya finally spoke up. "Well, this is unusual." Her voice was breathless, and her dark eyes were wide. A stream of light from the now 'setting' sun came through the window and caught one side of her face, and Corin saw her eye color change from deep brown to golden brown; her hair also changed from plain brown to red-gold. _She's so beautiful, why didn't I notice it before?_ He tried to move away but something held him in place.

"Perhaps I should go."

"Did I offend you, Captain?" Her voice was suddenly husky and mysterious, a low melody that enchanted him. There was a slight amount of fear in her eyes, but behind it there seemed to be a hint of desire.

"No, you're faster than I expected. You'd make a fine soldier. But we are in an awkward position, if you didn't notice."

"I did, actually. It would have been easy for me to escape, but I can't move for some reason."

"Same here." Corin tried again to move away, but couldn't. A strange look came into Alaya's deep eyes, something he'd seen in other women but never touched him as deeply as it did now in her, something that caused him to move even closer. She didn't protest as his lips settled on hers.

The shock of the kiss caused them both to pull away, and the look of regret in Alaya's eyes mirrored exactly what Corin felt.

"Forgive me, I didn't intend--"

"Captain, remember I could have stopped you easily. I am just as guilty as you."

The low melody in her voice seemed to decide something for Corin, and he came closer to her. For one brief moment he thought he saw again a shadow of fear in Alaya's dark eyes, but the feeling passed as she stepped away from the wall and closer to him. He saw her mouth open slightly and lowered his head, capturing her mouth with his, kissing her deeply. She didn't back away, but pressed her body against his, not protesting as he wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly, neither of them noticing when Corin pressed her back against the wall as he kissed her. Suddenly Corin was only dimly aware of his surroundings, but he was sharply conscious of Alaya's body pressing

against his, her breasts flat against him, her arms around his neck as she tangled her fingers in his hair. They both felt something new and unusual, something that thrilled them and scared them all at once. When they pulled away, Corin saw a troubled look in her eyes.

"Perhaps you should go, before we both make a mistake."

"Alaya, I--"

"Don't say anything, Corin. I'm as much to blame as you, but this should stop before it gets worse. Please, just go."

Corin didn't argue, but left quickly. _What is she afraid of? What fear keeps her away from me, when she feels what I feel?_ He couldn't come up with an answer to that question, anymore than he could understand why she inspired feelings in him that he'd never felt with any other woman. All he knew for sure was the feeling of intimacy, the barely leashed passion there had been between them, even in those brief moments. _So, there is a fire beneath the ice after all. Perhaps I will be the one to fan the flames._ He hoped it would be true, and wondered why he did.

&&

The Master Chief yanked the headset off as soon as the memory went dark. _What in the hellâ€_He looked over at Laura and saw an understanding look on her face.

"It's a bit disorienting, but highly informative. I've learned more about the Flood in a few days than I could find in three weeks' worth of hacking into ONI's database. Unfortunately, for every question answered there're several new ones that pop up. Plus, there's no way of knowing what memories will appear, and no way to control it, at least that I've found." She looked at him intently, and her look grew noticeably troubled. "What exactly did you see?"

"Nothing to do with the Flood, or Forerunner technology. There was very little useful information in that memory."

"I think I know something of what you saw. I've seen a lot of that as well, but it's all been connected to the Flood in some way. Alaya discovered a Flood genome, which she used to save her brother's life and the lives of several Forerunner soldiers. It was at that pointâ€hell, I doubt you'd understand even if I could explain it. At one point, she risked everything to save her brother's platoon from the Flood when they'd been abandoned by their high command, and spent six months in isolation as punishment because she had the guts to save lives." She spoke more quietly now, and the Chief could barely hear the words. "Maybe that's when he began to care about her, when she risked everything for her brother's sake. It reminded him of a soldier's duty to do the right thing."

"You mean Corin?" Her head whipped up in surprise.

"That's what you saw? You saw them together?"

"Not exactly. He came to her quarters and sparred with her."

A vacant expression drifted over Laura's face. "I remember, somehow.

I didn't see it before, when I had the headset on, but somehow I remember as though I were still wearing it. The thing must have unlocked a few subconscious memories. He kissed herâ€|"

She stopped abruptly, remembering that she wasn't alone in the room. An embarrassed look covered her face, and she looked down at her boots. He'd never seen her look so disconcerted before.

"Laura, are you alright?"

"Fine, just a little shocked. This is going to take some getting used to, trying to sort out my memories from Alaya's. And not just the ones about the Flood, either."

"What do you mean?" The Chief's question brought her head back up, and she stared at him intently.

"I think you know exactly what I mean. I just found out I have memories of someone else in my head, memories you happen to share to an extent, of a couple that could easily be mistaken for us. One can only wonder how long it would be before I forget I'm me and not this Alaya."

John finally realized what she was trying to say. _She's worried about losing control of her mind, and she thinks she's mistaken her own feelings about me for someone else's._ He decided to tell her why he'd come looking for her in the first place.

"Laura, I--"

"Don't say anything. I know you know what I feel, Cortana told me about my error. I don't expect anything from you, because I know you feel nothing for me. There's really nothing to say." She turned and walked away, leaving the Chief in surprised silence. For a moment, he felt as if it really had been Corin and Alaya instead of him and Laura. All of a sudden, he remembered something, something Corin had found ironically amusing when he'd first met Alaya. The thought echoed in his memory, dripping with scorn that would later be recanted as he grew to love her.

"_Alaya, is that really her name? Who in their right minds would name their child 'Beloved'?"_

25. Chapter 24: Welcome Home?

Disclaimer: I own nothing form Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Welcome Home?

****November 29, 2552 0755 hours****

****Covenant Warship _Holy Retribution_****

****En route to Sol System****

Laura made it back to the bridge quietly, hoping no one would notice her entry. She arrived in time to hear a debate about how to return to Earth.

"We have the ship, so why not just set a course from here to Earth?" Fred was asking.

"The Cole protocol doesn't permit a direct route to Earth, as you know very well," Cortana replied. "We are also not allowed an indirect route according to Subsection Seven: No Covenant vessel may be taken to Earth Space without an exhaustive search for tracking systems."

"The Covenant already know the way to Earth," Will pointed out.

"Overwhelming evidence is not absolute evidence," Cortana responded.

Laura decided to jump in at that point.

"All this bickering while there's a perfectly good ship in the docking bay. I'm surprised."

"When did you get in?" Fred asked.

"Just two minutes ago. Chiropteras are perfectly capable of Slipspace travel, and we're not able to search the ship ourselves for tracking devices, even if we knew where to look. All we need to do is get back to Earth, or as close to it as safety and the Cole protocol will allow, and bring back a few extra bodies to help search the ship. Problem solved, and you Spartans get some more medals out of the deal."

"Makes sense, provided the Slipspace drive is still working," Fred mused. Laura winced; she'd forgotten why the Chiroptera-class ships were decommissioned in the first place.

"I'll check that directly. Hopefully our luck holds out and it'll still be in good shape, enough to get the job done."

"Assuming we can still use that antique, how do you suppose we secure the ship, our prisoners, and fly a stealth ship at the same time?" Will asked.

"One problem at a time. We know we can use the stealth ship without it being tracked, and I think once we've secured the rest of the Retribution it'll only need one person to watch the prisoners. It's all up to you: who wants to do what?"

They'd finally made it back to Earth with the rest of the Retribution's crew—with a Prophet as an added bonus, in the ship's brig, and the ship free of any tracking devices. Laura had been about ready to add the Engineers to the cells as well, but the Chief stopped her.

"Let them be. They're no threat."

"And how do we know that for sure? For all we know there could be a saboteur among them, and you're still willing to let them have free rein to the rest of the ship?"

"They're going to be repairing it, not destroying it. They don't

really care about anything else." Noticing her rigid stance, the Chief added: "Let them be. That's an order."

"Sir!" She snapped off a salute and moved off, making sure the rest of the prisoners were secure.

When they finally got into Earth orbit, the small team headed to the launch bay, where a number of Phantoms were docked; securing those had been touchy business, Laura recalled with a smirk inside her helmet, since a number of Elite strike teams had holed up inside to escape the gas. The Spartans took one of these dropships down to the planet, leaving the prisoners onboard in containment fields. Laura silently took the pilot's seat, hoping she'd be able to figure out the controls; surprisingly, she knew exactly what control did which thing. Must be more of those weird memories. Concentrating fully on the task at hand, she piloted the U-shaped craft down with surprising skill, and gently landed the ship on one of the many landing pads around Williams Airfield. ONI had ordered them to return to Camp Hayes, since they wanted as few military personnel knowing about her as possible; since Camp Hayes was where Blade spent all of her time, sending the Spartans back there was considered the most secure course of action. Her helmet was on so they couldn't see her face, but the others noticed her discomfort; she was tensed, as if she were still expecting trouble.

"Ok, we're down. Opening the hatches now." If she really was nervous, it didn't show in her voice.

The four Spartans disembarked, dropping to the ground from one of the open hatches. Looking around they were slightly surprised to see a number of people grouped nearby, apparently waiting for them to return: General West, Colonel Ackerson and other officers were closest, looking the epitome of military standards in their dress uniforms. Nearby stood Dr. Gedeon in her usual lab coat and suit, Nicole Mitchell in a leather jacket and blue jeans, and a young woman with light brown hair they'd never met before. The woman was trying to restrain a pair of rambunctious young children, who seemed eager to get into some kind of mischief. The Master Chief headed towards West and Ackerson, saluting smartly; as much as he and the other Spartans loathed being around Ackerson, they still respected the chain of command.

"At ease, Master Chief," West stated as he returned the salute. He missed Ackerson's less-than-happy salute, as he was busy looking over the strike team.

"General West, Colonel Ackerson," John addressed the two officers, "the mission was accomplished successfully, and the Covenant cruiser is currently in orbit above the planet with prisoners aboard."

"Well done, Master Chief," Ackerson spoke in harsh, carefully controlled tones. "This is quite an accomplishment for you and your team. Any casualties?"

"One wounded, no KIA."

One more Spartan walked off the dropship, with her helmet off and a hole in the shoulder of her slightly burnt armor. The young woman he'd noticed earlier lost her grip on the two children as they ran forward.

"Auntie Laura! Auntie Laura!" they shouted as they ran up the ramp. Laura dropped to one knee, scooped them up and brought them up to eye level as she stood back up. The Spartans noticed how careful she was to be gentle with the youngsters, as if she knew how dangerous she could be while she was in the armor.

"Hey, it's the Terrible Tickling Twins! Have you two been good while I was gone?" The two children nodded vigorously as Laura walked back to the small group of people waiting nearby. As she set the kids down, John swore she winced, but she masked it quickly enough to greet the three women. Dr. Gedeon immediately noticed the damage to her armor.

"Laura, you're in no condition to be walking on your own. I don't want you standing anymore, certainly not in that armor."

"Don't have much choice about that, since I see Ackerson waving me over. I'll head over ASAP, fear not. Believe me, I'd rather go over now." She stopped and regarded the twins as they wrapped themselves around her armored legs. "Okay, you two, let go of me. I promise I'll see you later. Now let go of me so your mom can take you home." As she said this, Laura bent down and gently disentangled their arms. They ran off, shouting over their shoulders.

"Bye, Auntie Laura! Bye!"

Laura shook her dark head in silent amusement, until she noticed the others approaching. Squaring her shoulders, wincing again as her shoulder protested, she braced herself for the inevitable. Ackerson seemed cordial enough, but she noticed his disappointment at her still being alive.

"So, what happened to you?"

"Long story, too long to tell here. I'll send you a mission report. In the mean, why don't you ask them? I'm sure they did more than a mistake like me could ever hope to accomplish." Her voice was positively dripping with sarcasm on her last two statements. The Spartans were surprised at her remarks, and more than a little amused at Ackerson's reaction. He's definitely pissed, John thought. The little confrontation was interrupted by General West's approach.

"Well done, Laura. I'm impressed: an intact Covenant cruiser and a Prophet," he commented.

"Well done when I don't get my ass shot off, sir," Laura countered. "Besides, all I did was think and get shot. Not exactly good for the ole CSV. They did as much as I did, if not more. Now if you'll excuse me, Dr. Gedeon wants me in Medical ASAP. She seems to think I'll fall apart if I don't get there soon."

"Go on then, Laura. We certainly don't need you falling apart, especially not now. I'll expect a copy of your mission report soon." West smiled lightly, knowing exactly when Laura would send it: she delivered all her reports at exactly 1800 hours, no matter what day it was.

"Yes sir!" Laura snapped off a salute, ignoring Ackerson completely,

and moved off towards her bunk, determined to strip out of her armor in private and get into real clothes before heading to the base hospital.

****December 1, 2552 1510 hours****

****North America****

Two days later, Laura was seated on a rock ledge near her mother's house; it was one of her favorite spots, since it overlooked a small waterfall in the river there. She was actually crying, something that rarely happened. _After all I went through, they still refuse to acknowledge me,_ she thought sadly. Sitting on the rocky ledge, ignoring her physical discomfort, Laura mentally replayed the entire incident in detail:

There was an awards ceremony for the Spartans; she'd found out about it and had seated herself near the back so she could watch. The Spartans were standing there in their dress uniforms, uniforms covered in medal and citations she had earned but never received. Her disgust and disappointment mounted as she heard Ackerson giving them credit for the capture of the Covenant cruiser and the Prophet onboard, not even acknowledging her efforts or presence. West had been there, and she saw his disgust plainly, but the Spartans acted as though nothing had happened. Finally it had gotten to the point where she couldn't take anymore; she stood up and left, not caring if anyone noticed her leaving. If anyone followed her, she didn't notice, but headed straight here even though it was a twenty-mile hike from the base. Not many people knew this place, so there was no chance they'd look for her here.

Her tears flowed afresh as she thought again on the incident, even more so when she recalled that John had just stood there, even though he knew the truth: they all knew the truth, but only John had been in a position to do something about it. It hurt to think thatâ€¦ _Laura, get a grip on yourself,_ she thought angrily, once she realized what she had started to think about. _He probably didn't notice you, and even if he did he wouldn't have done anything to help you. He only cares about his fellow Spartans and the battlefield._ As she thought this, her sharp ears picked up noises, different from the normal chatter of the riverside: human voices. She dropped silently over the edge of the rock ledge; there were two large boulders on one side, and a small crevice in the wall of the ledge behind them. She could hole up there and never be noticed. As she hid, she listened and recognized the voices: Nicole and the four Spartans. _What the hell are they doing here?_

Nicole stood on the rock ledge, noticing patches of damp stone. "She was definitely here recently, and from the looks of things she was pretty upset."

"But where could she have gone?" Will asked, scanning the area. "There aren't a lot of tracks here, and the only place she could have gone is into the river. Can she swim?"

"Yeah, she's a good swimmer, but the river current here is too strong. She'd never survive the current from those rapids, and she knows she'd die trying to swim across the river here. She must have heard us coming and hid in the trees; Laura's been climbing trees since she was six years old." When Nicole said this, the Spartans

remembered a photograph of a young girl hanging out of a tree by her knees. While Linda and Will scanned the treetops, John and Fred checked around the ledge.

"There's a narrow edge over there where she could have walked down to the riverbed if she were careful," Fred noticed.

"Yes, but look over here," John motioned to the other side of the ledge, where two large boulders kept the river at bay, little pools of water being the only water there. "Someone could have used those to get away, and there are thousands of escape routes here. There's also too many places for her to hide, in spite of the fact that it's late autumn. It would take days to find her here, and she could easily double back and give us the slip." _No, we'll have to lure her out_.

With a few quick motions, John got the group together and used hand signals to explain his plan: Linda would head for high ground while he, Fred, and Will took cover in the brush along the bank. As the group moved off, he looked at Nicole.

"We're not staying any longer, Miss Mitchell. If you find Laura, tell her we're looking for her." Nicole nodded to show she understood, and the Spartan moved off into the brush.

Laura waited until the silence fell, then moved from her crevice. Nicole was standing alone, looking at the rapids. She whistled lightly, using a wood dove's call. Nicole turned and looked down.

"So that's where you were hiding." She smiled as Laura jumped up onto the ledge and sat down, wincing as her injuries complained at the exertion. "We were looking everywhere for you."

"I wanted to be alone, Nick, and I'm surprised you forgot about the crevice down there," she replied, her voice cracking from her tears earlier. "I didn't think anyone would even care to look for me."

"Believe me, at least four people were besides me and your mom."

"I heard, Nick. Why did you bring them here?" Her voice cracked again from the sense of betrayal she felt.

"Laura, they were disgusted with what Ackerson did today, even more so when they realized you were there to see it. The Master Chief saw you walk out, at which point he noticed Ackerson had seen you, and he saw the look on his face; apparently he'd known you were there the entire time."

"Wouldn't put it past him, the snake," Laura muttered darkly. "But why were the Spartans looking for me? What did they want, and why did you bring them here?"

"They wanted to talk to you, tell you they were sorry. I brought them because you need them, even though you refuse to admit it. You're more of a Spartan than a civilian, and they know that; they want to help you. If I hadn't done anything, that would have been a worse betrayal: everyone can see your need but you, and even if you did, you're too proud to admit you need help. If I hadn't brought them,

you'd have suffered even more; you don't deserve to be alone."

"Nicole," she turned and Nicole saw the pain in her friend's dark eyes, "I'll always be alone, no matter what. I can't ever be a civilian, because I was raised to be a soldier. Among soldiers I'll never belong, because I'm considered a 'freak' for being a Spartan. The Spartans will never accept me, because I was never one of them on Reach, never fought or suffered beside them. Even among people who don't know me or my past, I'll always be alone: my life has separated me from humanity, all because I was chosen as the test case, the human guinea pig, for a project to save humanity."

"Laura, look at me. You're not alone. You've got me and Nathan, your family, General West, Lorienna, and now I think you have the Spartans. If they didn't accept you, why would they have come looking for you?"

"To finish what the Covenant and ONI started perhaps?" Laura choked out, not wanting to believe it. "Nick, look what's happened to me! I can't even shake hands with someone without wondering if they're going to try and kill me. I'm suspecting everyone as being an assassin. How can anyone accept me like this?" Sensing someone behind her, Laura whirled around, automatically placing herself in front of Nicole to protect her.

"Relax, Laura." It was John, Fred, and Will, unarmed and in plain military fatigues. Somehow, Laura had never noticed them nearby; she knew better than to make such dumb mistakes. _Probably I was so upset I wasn't thinking clearly_, she thought grimly. Scanning the treetops, she spotted Linda in a weeping willow that still had all its leaves; she was well concealed as was her way, unless you knew what to look for.

"So, you've started eavesdropping, have you?" she asked harshly, but there was still pain in her voice that she didn't even bother to hide.

"We wanted to talk to you, but you hid too well," Will commented, a trace of admiration in his tone.

"I very much doubt that. After all, how could a mistake in the program be good at anything? Isn't that what everyone calls me, when they're not calling me traitor behind my back?" She grimaced at her own rough tone, realizing she was taking out her anger on the Spartans, and tried to rein in her temper.

"Then they're fools," Linda replied as she dropped down from the willow. She jogged over, taking the rocky ground with almost no difficulty. As Laura and the Spartans stared at each other, it seemed that a kind of understanding had finally sprung up. It wound up being the Master Chief who spoke first.

"We're on your side, Spartan."

Laura smiled faintly at this unexpected wave of support, a few tears trickling down her face again. She wiped them roughly aside.

"Well, it seems there are too many of us for this rock ledge. We should head up to the road, and towards someplace the Spartans would

be more used to." The Spartans heard something in her tone which indicated the beginnings of trust. She was finally coming around, like West and Nicole had said: it took a while to gain her trust, but once you did you had an ally whose loyalty knew almost no boundaries. _No matter what her differences, she's one of us now,_ John thought.

26. Chapter 25: NotsoMerry Christmas

The Spartans' first memorable Christmas, complete with a hyperactive corgi! Sorry if it's a little long. Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Not-so-Merry Christmas

****December 17, 2552 1032 hours****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Laura had a special surprise planned for Nicole and her niece, Taylor. Taylor held a special place in Laura's heart, second only to her affection for the twins; hell, she'd practically helped raise Taylor since her mother had died and her dad had been called into action, and Taylor considered her a second mother. Laura had told Nicole and Taylor to wait in front of the base while she went and got something in preparation for the Christmas party Nicole was hosting that night. Leaving them waiting in front of the gate, Laura slipped inside and looked around until she spotted an old friend.

"Hey, Nathe! Get over here!" she called jovially.

Nathan Mitchell turned and headed in Laura's direction, a smile on his face: the last time he'd seen Laura she had just turned twenty, and in his eyes the extra twenty years left no impression on her face. _Of course, _he thought with a smile, _she had the augmentation, so that might have something to do with it, plus her mother also aged well._

"Hey, Laurabeth! How goes it?" He smiled as she clasped his hand warmly, noting how careful she was not to grip too hard.

"Same old, same old. Anyway, I have a surprise for you. Close your eyes and let me lead you." With that, she grabbed his hand and led him outside the base, where Nicole and Taylor were waiting with _their_ eyes closed. Leading Nathan almost up to Nicole completely, Laura dropped his hand, got out of the line of sight, and yelled "Okay, open your eyes!"

"Daddy!" Taylor ran up and shrieked in delight as her father scooped her up and hugged her tightly. Nicole followed at a more sedate pace, and when she got there Nathan wrapped one arm around her waist and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"Nathan, I'm glad you're home," Nicole said, eyes shining as she looked at her brother.

"Good to be home. I just arrived a few weeks ago; the Spartans

brought me back in the middle of one of their ops. Laura found out I was here andâ€" he stopped and looked around. "Where did she go?"

"I think we'll see her later, Nathe. There's a Christmas party tonight, and a lot of people will be there, including her."

"And the Spartans?"

"I'll extend a special invitation just for them," Nicole smiled, her clear eyes shining even more brightly.

****December 17, 2552 1900 hours****

****Mitchell Residence****

****North America****

Laura stood in a corner at Nicole's, silent and watchful. There were a lot of ONI officers here, each one a potential threat, but it was Ackerson she had to watch out for most. He'd come with General West, and Nicole had been decidedly uncomfortable about letting him in, but too polite to turn him away. As she stood brooding on this and various other things, she noticed Nathan heading her way.

"There you are! Why are you hiding in a corner when you could be dancing?"

"I haven't had any cause to dance for a long time, Nathe," she replied, a slight smile tugging at the corners of her mouth; Nathan had been after her heart for years.

"Well, why don't you start now?" Nathan held out his hand, and Laura took it. _If nothing else, it might piss off Ackerson,_ she thought. A lively Christmas tune came on the speakers, and the two began to dance along with several other couples.

The Master Chief felt a pang of jealousy as he watched Laura dancing with Lieutenant Mitchell, something he hadn't felt since childhood. _Why am I jealous?_ He and the others watched as Nathan tried to move closer to her. It was like watching him try to catch smoke; whenever he got close enough to touch her, she slipped away at the last minute, keeping the rhythm of the music while not letting him get too close. When he finally caught her, they could tell it was only because she allowed it.

"Oh, look, mistletoe," they heard Nathan mutter as he leaned his face closer to hers. Laura waited until his face almost touched hers, then kissed himâ€"on the tip of his nose. General laughter ensued, Nathan Mitchell turned a dark red, and Laura slipped out of his arms and headed for the punch bowl. Fortunately for the Lieutenant, his momentary embarrassment was short-lived as a bundle of red-gold started streaking around the room.

"SKEETER!" Nicole and Nathan both shouted.

"Catch him!" Laura called; in the next minute, the three friends began trying to catch the little bundle of fur as he raced in between the guests. Most of those were busy trying to avoid the corgi altogether, no easy task considering the breakneck speed the dog was

running at.

"How did he get out?" Nicole asked, breathless as she tried to chase the little corgi around the room.

"Animals are much more intelligent than we think," Laura muttered as she tried to flank the speedy little mass.

"Intelligent or not, this dog is a nuisance and a half," Nathan grunted as he tried to squeeze under a table and grab hold of the dog's collar. Skeeter bolted out and through several pairs of legs, wriggling his way into a narrow opening between a heavy couch and a wall.

"Face it, Nathe, you wouldn't want it any other way," Laura smirked as she knelt down in front of the dog's hiding place. "He's laughing at us now, since he thinks we can't get him." Sure enough, the corgi had a look on his face reminiscent of a taunting child. Laura poked her head in through the opening, presenting a rather amusing picture as her butt stuck out in the air behind her.

"Ok, Skeeter-butt, come on out ofâ€"gah!" Laura pulled herself back, grabbed a napkin, and started wiping the sudden accumulation of moisture off her face. "Beware, dog can't hold its licker," she quipped, voice slightly muffled by the napkin.

"How are we going to get him out of there?" Nicole sounded worried.

"Chew toys? Specifically, his rope?" Laura asked, dark eyes smiling as her friends caught the not-so-subtle hint.

"Ah, good idea," Nathan nodded. "I'll go get it."

A few minutes later, Laura had actually tugged the dog out of his hiding place using the toy, and they had sealed him in a closed room.

"Well, that was an adventure and a half," Laura muttered as she brushed dog hairs off her shirt. "I can take on the Covenant in any field, but I can barely outwit a corgi. Go figure."

"I still wish I knew how he got out." Nathan muttered.

"Did you put him in the latch pen?" Laura asked, referring to a gate that could be placed in front of a doorway. Nathan nodded.

"That explains it. I meant to bring this up, but other things drove it out of mind. Skeeter learned how to open the latch a few weeks ago. I meant to say something before."

"It's ok, Laura. We all know how things can get on base." Just as he said that, they got back to the party and the power went out.

"What the hell?" someone shouted. "What just happened?"

"Cool it, kid. Probably just a few frozen power lines," Laura called from the other side of the room. She seemed completely unperturbed by the situation. A little girl started crying, and the Spartansâ€"who were the only ones besides Laura who could see in the dark

room--watched Laura go and pick her up.

"It's ok, Taylor Mae, I've got you. No monsters are coming for you with your daddy and me on the watch." She turned and passed the girl to Nathan Mitchell, who hugged the child and stroked her hair.

"Laura, could you see about maybe getting some candles?" Nicole asked, seeming to know her friend's exact capabilities; not many civilians knew Spartans could see in the dark, and very few military personnel knew it either.

"Easy. I'll be back with candles and maybe a few flashlights for good measure," she replied calmly as she headed for the kitchen. They heard her rummaging around for a few moments before she returned, a lit candle in one hand and several more unlit ones in the other. "I couldn't find a whole lot of candlesticks, so we'll have to be careful."

"I know where they're at," Nathan said as he got up, took a candle and lit it, and went back to the kitchen. After he left, his sister noticed Taylor yawning.

"Ok, Taylor, bedtime."

"No, Auntie Nicole, I don't wanna go to sleep. There's monsters in my room."

Laura caught the look Nicole shot her. "Come on, Taylor Mae, I'll go with you and chase out all the monsters. They won't dare come back after that." She scooped the little girl up. "Wow, you're getting big. Keep growing like this and I won't be able to pick you up anymore." Still holding the lit candle, she carried Taylor upstairs to her room. Once she'd tucked the girl in, she waited until she was asleep before leaving; as she started down the stairs, however, she heard what sounded like an argument, and paused to listen.

Nathan had returned with the candlesticks just as Laura carried Taylor up to bed. He understood exactly why, and even approved; Taylor loved Laura almost as much as the rest of them did. Setting down the candlesticks, he and Nicole began inserting candles and lighting each one.

"Too bad Laura couldn't have waited a few minutes before going upstairs. She might burn herself with the hot wax," Nicole commented.

"A good thing, too, I'd say," Ackerson muttered under his breath, but not softly enough. Almost everyone in the room heard, including Nicole. She got up and slapped him across the face.

"Laura is one of the truest officers you have! Has she ever done anything to make herself look like a traitor? What has she done to you that you hate her so much?"

"She exists," Ackerson growled. "If it hadn't been for her father she wouldn't even be in the UNSC."

"Oh don't you dare bring Colonel Morisson into this!" Nicole was almost shouting now. "The last thing he would have wanted was for

Laura to be in the military. I know, I've asked him, and he told me he had no choice! So don't you dare blame others for things Laura couldn't control!"

"And how would you know? That information is classified, and only a traitor would see it, a traitor such as Blade!" A soft footfall behind him caused Ackerson to turn and see Laura's face, illuminated by a single candle. Hot candle wax dripped down and coalesced into twisted, fluted columns. A single trickle of wax dripped onto her hand, but her face remained impassive, except for a strange look in her dark eyes; it seemed to the Spartans that the comment had hurt her, even though she'd endured worse.

"Who is the real traitor?" she asked softly. "Does trying to save innocent lives in violation of orders make someone a traitor? Does doing the right thing brand someone a fool? Or is it twisting the truth into lies to destroy a memory that makes someone a real traitor? Do you have the right to judge?" Candle wax continued to drip on her hand, and somehow, as Laura turned to set the candle on the table, a drop hit Ackerson's hand. As he gasped in shock and pain, Laura turned and looked at him, the soft glow of the candles seeming to pull her cold outer layers away and showing the humanity that was always hidden beneath.

"It hurts, doesn't it? But that is nothing compared to the pain I've endured for thirty-seven years." She set the candle down and went to the hall closet. A moment later they heard the front door close as she walked out into the raging snow.

Nicole looked hard at Ackerson, a cold fury in her eyes. "You still insist on destroying her, bit by precious bit? Well, chew on this: if she dies, I will personally make sure the world knows why, and there will be nothing you can do to stop it." An empty threat, and everyone in the room knew it, but no one decided to call her bluff.

The snow swirled around even more than ever, blocking the house and trapping everyone inside. No one expected to see the light of day for a long while, and Nicole feared for her friend out in the cold. She didn't sleep, but kept herself awake and looking out the windows, in case Laura should return. Skeeter, who had somehow managed to get loose again, sat next to her, seemingly aware that something was wrong; he was quiet and calm for once, occasionally nudging and licking Nicole's hand in a canine attempt at comfort. Hearing movement in the darkness, she noticed General West and the Spartans were still awake even though everyone else had gone to sleep hours ago.

"Is she out there?" West asked in a low voice.

"I haven't seen her since she left. If she didn't make it through the storm, we'd never know it: the drifts are huge. We're snowed in, so even if she did try to make it back here she'd never get inside." The Spartans noticed her worried look, as did (apparently) the dog; he nuzzled her hand again, trying to make his mistress feel better.

"She's a Spartan, Miss Mitchell," Linda pointed out in an attempt to ease her fears. "She'll survive."

"Laura may be a Spartan, yes, but she's also a Morisson," Nicole

smiled. "They never give up and never give in, if she and her brothers are anything to go by: stubborn and hot-tempered a lot of the time, but proud and strong. She'll make it."

A loud noise outside interrupted the conversation as well as waking up everyone in the house. There was the groan of machinery, followed in a few moments by a loud knocking.

"General West? Colonel Ackerson?" a man's voice called from the other side of the door; the Master Chief recognized the voice of Sergeant A.J. Johnson.

"We're here. We're snowed in," West called.

"Not anymore. We got a message you were here, and you were blocked in, so we came and dug you out. Ain't never seen a storm like that in years," Johnson muttered under his breath as he opened the door.

Nicole and Skeeter were the first ones out: Nicole because she wanted to find Laura, Skeeter because he had to go. While the corgi relieved himself, Nicole scanned the ground nearby and found a small sprig of plastic holly leaves partially buried in one of the many drifts. It was the same sprig Laura had been wearing in her hair during the party.

"Oh no," she whispered as she sank to her knees in the snow.

Nathan came up and saw Nicole's distraught face.

"Laura's fine, Nick. Who else could have given Johnson that message?"

"Of course. I'd forgotten. It's just that when I saw the hollyâ€¦" she didn't need to finish the sentence. Skeeter trotted up, sniffed the plastic, and whined. He started running around eagerly, trying to pick up the familiar scent. In spite of his efforts, it was Nicole's ears that found Laura, with the faint sound of panpipes playing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," one of Laura's favorite carols. _She's safe. Laura's ok._ Nicole smiled.

****December 24, 2552 2000 hours****

****Gedeon Residence****

****North America****

Laura sat in a rocking chair in her mother's house, having stolen a few quiet moments to herself. _Christmas parties may be fun, but sometimes you just need to think_. She was sitting and humming 'Candlelight Carol' when she saw her niece wander in.

"Auntie Laura, what's wrong?" Laura smiled; Katrina was very perceptive for a four-year-old, and they had always been very close.

"I just wanted to sit and think, babycakes," she smiled as Katrina climbed up on her lap.

"Are you sad?"

"Kat, someday you're going to be as smart as your daddy; he could always tell when something was bothering me. I'm not sad, but I'm worried."

"Worried about Daddy?"

"Your daddy, my daddy, Grandma, Uncle Phil even," Laura smiled. "Don't worry about me, I'll be ok."

Two hours later, Angela Morisson turned and looked at her son, Alex; he was out cold draped over one arm of the couch. She smiled and looked around for his twin, but couldn't see her. What she did see was four tall people staring into the next room, and went over to see why even though she already had a guess as to what she would see.

The Master Chief and his friends watched in silent amazement at the scene before them: Laura sitting on a rocking chair, a young girl asleep on her lap. She continued rocking gently as she stroked the child's light brown hair, holding her gently so she didn't fall off. Looking up, Laura put one finger to her lips, signaling silence; there was a look of contentment on her face, which made her look more human.

Laura looked up to see the Spartans watching her, and signaled them to silence. _It wouldn't do any good to have them wake her up_. While she was rocking, she heard 'Candlelight Carol' begin playing in the other room, and a slight smile tugged at her mouth. A few moments later Angela entered the room, and smiled at the idyllic scene. She disappeared a moment later and returned with Alex in her arms. Laura nodded and rose gently, careful not to disturb the sleeping child, and assisted her mother in putting her and her twin brother to bed.

****December 25, 2552 0003 hours****

****Gedeon Residence****

That night, the Master Chief was sitting up and awake (since he and his Spartans had been invited to stay the night) when he heard a faint rustling; the sound intensified as a slender figure glided into the room, a figure in a long, flowing, multicolored robe. Even though she could see in the darkness, he watched as Laura lit a match and held it to a small candle. Using this lit candle, she lit five candles in the holly-covered holder on the table. Carrying the small candle to the living room, she lit all the candles sitting out, and blew out the little candle she was holding. The rooms were bathed in a soft glow, and Laura used the gentle light to arrange a centerpiece on the table with the unique candelabra. She arranged pine branches around a wooden bowl, centered holly boughs inside, and tucked little wrapped packages amongst the boughs. Setting this on the table, she looked around in the candle glow and saw him watching.

"Did I wake you, Master Chief?"

"I was awake when you came out." He noticed how carefully she chose her words, knowing that he was the cause; apparently their encounter aboard the _Holy Retribution_ was still on her mind. Looking at her face in the glow, he noticed a gentle kindness there he'd never seen

before: it was as though all the hardness and coldness in her had been burned away.

"I wanted to get this done before Alex and Emma Louise woke up," she explained quietly, not wanting to wake anyone else. "They enjoy seeing all the little surprises Santa leaves them every Christmas. Even though I do it, not Santa, it gives them something to look forward to."

"You're fond of them, aren't you?" She thought she heard curiosity in his voice.

"They're my brother's children; how could I not be fond of them? I've helped look after them ever since they were born; they're the closest thing I'll ever have to children of my own." Not realizing it, she stepped closer, her thin robe rustling around her softly.

All of a sudden, it seemed to the Master Chief that time was standing still. Laura was standing in front of him, looking soft and fragile in the candlelight. Before he realized it, he was leaning closer to her, one arm snaking around her waist. She drew closer to him, somehow unsure whether he pulled her or if she moved on her own. _What's happening to me? How can this be happening?_ She couldn't think of the answers, but some part of her didn't want to. Before she realized it, she was in his arms, looking up towards his face; there was a strange look in his eyes, so different from his usual impassive gaze. The Spartan in front of her lowered his head, gently pressing his lips on her own, seeming almost unsure of himself. She drew even closer then, pressing her lips against his, returning the tentative kiss he was giving with one stronger, more knowing. He tightened his embrace, pulling her tight against him, his kiss deepening with each passing second. A fire sparked deep inside her, warming her every limb; she wanted to explore these newfound sensations, which she associated with the love she felt for this man. Part of her retained her senses, however; she knew what might happen if things continued along this line. _I can't let this continue_, she thought. _I can't let him love me, and I can't love him._ She pulled away as gently as she could, knowing how dangerous it would be to insult him, but she didn't pull away without regret.

"I should go."

"Laura, wait." It was the first time he had called her by name since they'd captured the Covenant ship.

"This should never have happened. If this continues, if people find out, ifâ€"she broke off, apparently realizing how close she was coming to revealing some dangerous, forbidden secret. "No matter. Needless to say, this can't continue. It's dangerous for everyone. Good night, Master Chief." She went around the room, blowing out the candles; when the last one was extinguished, she glided away, hoping she could still the ache in her heart.

John was confused; what had made him kiss her? Why had she pulled away? And why, all of a sudden, had she become so cold to him? His head was reeling as if he had just been hit in the head and knocked unconscious. As he tried to gather his thoughts, he noticed the smoke from the candles coalescing into a small cloud as it drifted upwards: the cloud seemed to take the shape of an old woman's face. The cloudy face smiled, and he almost swore he heard words whispered with the

light voice of a breeze.

Don't worry, she just wants to protect you. She loves you, and fears for you. Only time may tell what will happen, I cannot. The cloudy face disappeared, and John rubbed his eyes: obviously he needed sleep more than he realized.

As soon as she got to her room, Laura felt the tears start running down her face. She hadn't asked for the Master Chief to kiss her. _No, but you hoped he would,_ she reminded herself as she shut the door; if any of the Spartans saw her cry, they'd never let her forget it. _If he only knew how much it hurt to reject him, _she thought sadly. Pulling back the blankets, she slipped into her bed; she found herself hugging the pillow close to her as if it could substitute for the strong, warm chest she had been pressed against not two minutes ago. It hadn't been her first kiss, and it was almost shy (if such a thing applied to a Spartan), but it had touched her in a way she'd never thought possible before. There was nothing more tempting at this point than for Laura to go back out there, wrap her arms around him, and kiss him again and again, but she knew that could never happen. _It's not safe,_ she thought. _I can't love him._ Just before she drifted off to sleep, a single thought echoed in her mind, in a voice that sounded like her grandmother's:

If you love someone enough, it will protect you both.

****December 25, 2552 0810 hours****

****Gedeon Residence****

Almost as soon as the sun was up, the twins were up and running to the tree. Laura, wearing pressed green slacks and a red-and-gold sweater, herded them to the table for breakfast, even though she could see they wanted nothing more than to open presents. A small smile grew on her face as she listened to their protests.

"Your presents aren't going anywhere," their mother lectured from the kitchen as she cut slices of what appeared to the Master Chief to be a roll of some sort. "Now sit down and eat. I thought you two liked Christmas nut roll." The two children immediately got silent, and now opened their mouths only to stuff them with breakfast. Angela, Dr. Gedeon, Laura, and the Spartans showed a bit more decorum with their eating habits, but the Spartans noticed Laura was deliberately avoiding looking at them.

"As usual, Mom, a perfect breakfast."

"Thank you, Laurabeth. Well, now that most of us are finished eating," she said as she glanced at the twins' faces covered in crumbs, which their mother promptly wiped off with a napkin, "shall we go open presents?"

"Yay!" The twins bolted out of their chair and to the gifts, stopping just short of running into the tree.

"Just a minute, you two," their grandmother called. "Aunt Laura gets the first gift." The twins stopped and waited, looking a little disappointed but smart enough to listen. The elderly doctor reached under the tree and pulled out a small box, about the size of her hand. Passing it to Laura, she sighed deeply.

"Your father and I meant this as a wedding present, but since that may not happen anymore, I figured you might as well have it now. Better get some use out of it before it's too late."

"If I didn't know better, Mom, I'd say you were suspicious," Laura smiled as she slipped the ribbon off the box and started in on the wrapping paper. "I've not done anything like that, so you can be reassured." As she finished unwrapping the box, she noticed a verse written on the lid, a verse from a winter poem she'd written many years ago:

_The wisdom of snow, _

_As it drifts down below _

_Carries lost kindred's tears _

_And their joy through the years. _

Lifting the lid, her eyes widened. She dipped her hand into the box and pulled out a silver necklace. The pendant hanging from the chain turned slowly, and all could see it was a little silver snowflake, about five centimeters in diameter. It glittered as it turned, and the Spartans noticed the front of it was dotted with pale blue gemstones. Linda looked closer, and saw a small, bare patch of plain silver in the very center.

"The spot in the center can be engraved," Dr. Gedeon was saying. "We were hoping to put your husband's name in there and give it to you as a wedding gift, but as I said before, I doubt that will happen now."

"Whether it does or not, it's beautiful. Thank you, Mom." Her dark eyes were shining as she put the necklace on; it didn't match well with her sweater, but she didn't seem to care. Smiling, she handed out gifts one by one; since it was wartime, there wasn't much, but everyone got at least one gift. Her mother received a carved wooden holder for the various pens and pencils she had scattered on her desk. Angela was given a carved salad bowl, carefully varnished and coated in a special fixative, which would keep it safe and still allow for its use. She was given, in turn, a new workout suit from Angela, and clay ashtrays from the twins, which looked kind of shapeless. Laura took them anyway, and smilingly produced two more gifts from behind her back.

"One for Alexander the Great, one for Katrina," she grinned. Alex tore through the wrapping paper to find a wooden sword and shield, just his size.

"Thank you, Auntie Laura!"

"Just promise me you'll not go after your sister with those, or I'll take them away," his mother admonished sternly, but she and Laura shared a small smile. Katrina meanwhile was still trying to open her package; Laura knew it was fragile, and had wrapped it carefully. She finally got it open to reveal a small wooden flute, just like her aunt's.

"Guess now I'll have to teach you to play," Laura smiled at her young

niece; although she loved them both dearly, Katrina was her favorite of the two. As she ran to give her aunt a hug, Laura picked her up and swung her around, laughing right along with her. Then Alex demanded the same treatment, and got whirled around as well, while Laura's mother shook her head.

"I swear, Laura, sometimes you're just as bad as both of them."

"Why do you think we get along so well?" she smiled as she put Alex down and watched him run off 'to kill dragons and dinosaurs,' his sister following closely. Glancing over at the Spartans, her smile faded a little, but she kept it there. "Don't worry, we didn't forget you. Merry Christmas." She reached behind a chair and came up with four wrapped packages. They'd been hidden so she wouldn't worry about the twins getting at them.

The Spartans were surprised by the gifts, almost as surprised as they were to be getting any gifts at all. Still, they were excellent gifts, perfectly chosen, in fact. Fred received a plain pair of sais, which he apparently couldn't wait to try out. Linda got a small tool kit; designed specifically to go with an SRS99C-S2 AM sniper rifle, it would give her an extra hand with some of the modifications she always made to the things. Will received a pair of handguns: their design was one of the more dependable types, and certainly better than what he usually carried as a sidearm. For the Master Chief, there was a set of silencers, custom made and designed for battle rifles and various ammunition calibers. Impressive gifts, he thought, but why did she even decide to give them? He noticed how she refused to meet his eyes; obviously she still remembered the kiss earlier.

Linda was examining her new tool kit with great interest. "Where did you get this? These are supposed to be hard to find."

"I have a few contacts in the right places, and a small amount of money," Laura replied. Loath as she would be to admit it, she was beginning to enjoy Linda's company. Still smiling, she glanced at Fred trying to twirl one of his new sais. "It takes practice, and a lot of time. I can teach you the basics if you'd like, but the discipline itself takes years to master."

"Thanks," Fred replied, for once not as gruff toward her.

"Yes, thanks indeed," the Chief added, his voice seeming a bit chilly; Laura inwardly winced. "You certainly didn't need to do this."

"No, but it's Christmas, the season of gifts and giving," she replied as she got up. "I'd better go check on the twins, make sure they haven't killed each other yet." A loud noise from the other side of the house caused both her and Angela to sprint quickly in the general direction of the twins. Good, he's being cold to me, she thought as she hurried along. I did the right thing. Even as she thought this, she doubted that she was right.

****January 4, 2552 1100 hours****

****North America****

Laura, Angela, and the twins were out for a good round of ice-skating, shortly after Christmas time. While Angela supervised the twins with getting into their skates, Laura was up and gliding gracefully. She leapt and spun in the air, pirouetted on the ice, and skated easily across the surface of the pond. Alex and Katrina skated in a wobbly manner, until their mother helped them out a little. Even so, they fell on their butts a few times. Laura smiled as she skated over, stopping smoothly beside them.

"Don't feel bad; my first time out my butt was on the ice more often than my skates were. You'll get the hang of it." _It helps that they have those roller blades for the summer that they've been using all year_, she thought with a smile. In a little while they did get the hang of it, and Laura skated off by herself, pretending she was dancing on the ice forâ€|_no, don't think of that, don't even think of thinking of that_, she told herself. _It's not worth the heartache_. She had had to be cold to him to save his life. Now she was sure he hated her, and it was enough, but her heart still ached. She was so wrapped up in her thoughts that by the time she turned to look back, it was almost too late.

Katrina had skated off by herself, trying to skate as smoothly as her aunt. She was far away from her mother and her twin when she began to hear the cracking and popping. Looking down, she saw the cracks in the ice and barely had time to yell before it broke, sending her straight down into freezing waters.

Laura and Angela turned in time to see Katrina scream. The Spartan moved quickly, stripping off her parka even as she skated past her sister-in-law. She didn't dare think about her own fate in the frigid air; all she could see was her niece, the closest thing to a daughter she would ever have, who now was threatened with an icy, watery grave. _No, I can't let it happen_. She was a few feet away from Katrina when the ice gave way beneath her, sending her into the water. Spluttering, she came up and swam to her niece, who had almost stopped trying to keep her head above water.

"Katrina, look at me, look at me. I'm here, I'll get you out. Understand?" The girl nodded, feeling colder than she ever had in her life. Laura picked her up and threw her out of the water; she landed perfectly on top of a nearby snowdrift. While her mother skated over and wrapped her in Laura's discarded parka, Laura swam to the edge of the ice and pulled herself up. Angela was busy trying to rub the life back into her daughter. Katrina was still breathing, but her skin was starting to turn blue; Laura recognized the beginning stages of hypothermia.

"Angie, there's no time. You can't help her, but I can. If I run at top speed I can get back to my bunk before she freezes to death. I'll get her there." Angela nodded, and Laura kicked out of her skates and picked up the bundle. She took off like a shot, remembering all the races she'd run with a family friend's horses to build her endurance, only this race was much more important. Her wet hair streamed out behind her as she ran for the base, and she could feel the cold keenly as the beginnings of hypothermia and frostbite started to set in. _I don't care what happens to me, but let her be ok. Please, let

her be ok._ She ran as quickly as she could, not bothering with the secret gate she'd made; it would take too long, and she needed speed. The main gate was closest; she ran for it, running faster than she ever had before. The MPs saw her coming, saw she was dripping wet, and saw that the bundle she was carrying was a child wrapped up in Blade's own parka; guessing the situation, they opened the gate quickly, and the Spartan they thought they hated so much shot through, a look of fear on her face they'd never seen before.

Laura made it to her door, paused long enough to unlock and open it, and hightailed it into the bathroom. There was a bathtub in this particular bunkhouse, thank goodness, and she dumped her niece in it, clothes and all; spinning the dial on the wall, she started running water at a borderline warm-hot temperature. Katrina wasn't moving, she didn't even react when the warm water started creeping up around her waist.

"Katie, Katie, wake up honey! Come on, babycakes, wake up!" Laura was nearly frantic by now. "Come on, Katrina Elaine Morisson, don't you dare give up on me now! Come on!" She noticed the girl beginning to move, and her sharp ears caught a few whispered words: "cold, so cold."

"It's ok, Katie, I'll get you warm," Laura murmured soothingly as she stuck her feet and her hands in the warm stream still pouring into the tub. As much as she wanted to turn the temperature up higher, she knew Katrina wouldn't be able to stand it. All she could do now was wait, try and rub some circulation back into her niece's limbs, and reassure the child she would be all right.

"Hey, babycakes, I'm gonna shift out of these wet things," Laura said after about ten minutes of sitting with her feet in the warm water. She turned the stream off and smiled at her niece. "You just sit and soak and splash. I'll dry off and get some dry clothes on, and then your mom is coming to pick you up. You just stay here, ok?" Katrina nodded and started playing in the water, which would help the blood circulate through her limbs and warm her faster, while Laura took a towel and dripped her way into her room. Peeling off her wet clothes, she dried off vigorously and wrapped the towel around her body, then began searching for warm, dry clothes and blankets. While she was searching, she heard movement behind her, and turned to find several Marines standing behind her; she'd been so concerned about tending to her niece, she hadn't even shut the door, and they'd just walked right in.

"What are you doing in here? Have you no respect for privacy?" she snapped, tugging the towel tighter around her frame.

"Have you no respect for other people's children?" one of them replied coldly.

"My niece is recovering from a bout of hypothermia, and her mother will be along to collect her shortly. You still haven't answered my question, though: what are you doing in here?"

"We came to get the kid," another Marine sneered.

"Well, yeah, there's the kid, but that's just on the side, really," a third one replied, an evil look on his face.

"Really? And dare I ask what you were planning to do after you take my niece out of here?" Laura asked coldly, glad she'd shut the door to the bathroom.

"Take her back to her mom, of course," the leader grinned evilly; she didn't trust that grin in the least.

Laura quickly considered her options: she could try to break past them, grab Katrina and run; she could stay and try to fight them; she could try keeping them occupied with words until Angela showed up; or she could let them kill her and take her niece to who-knows-where, thereby taking the coward's way out. Getting past them would only result in her niece getting hurt, and letting them kill her wasn't an option. She certainly was in no condition to fight, though she would if pressed. That left only one course of action: stall until Angela arrived.

"And if I turned Katrina over to you, how do I know you'd return her to her family? Why should I trust my niece to your care?"

"Because you have no choice," one of them grinned. "You're not going to put up much of a fight, meat."

"Oh really?" she sneered, dark eyes flicking around the room as she searched for her knives and checked the area for more threats. _Dammit, can't they let it go for just one day, even? And I can't fight them all and keep Katie safe._ She still had to try. "I may go down, but I won't let you take my niece while I still have breath in my body."

The Marines snickered, expecting an easy fight, especially when one of them held up her knives. _Oh, no! How long have they been in here?_ Calling up what strength she had, she kicked out, trying to defend in spite of feeling like an iceblock.

"You bitch!" one of the Marines cursed as she caught him in the balls. Laura pulled her arm back for a punch, but another Marine grabbed her wrist and pulled back; she stumbled, regaining her footing and trying to assume a defensive posture.

"This the best you can do?" one sneered.

"Try me in a fair fight, and you'll see," she muttered, but she knew she was probably dead.

"Yeah, right, Blade," the leader taunted. "You're dead, anyway, traitor." Laura tried to keep from moving as they closed in, hoping to surprise them and take them off-guard. As they advanced, though, a cold voice behind them caused the Marines to stop.

"Get away from her." Four people stood behind the Marines, furious looks on their pale faces. Laura thought she'd faint with relief; she'd never been so happy to see the Spartans in her quarters. Fred and Will were tensed, ready for a fight, Linda was scowling in such a way you almost wished she had the sniper rifle rather than face her in close quarters, and John had a look on his face that Laura imagined could have made even a Hunter quail. As he walked into the room, Laura sensed the anger radiating from him.

"If you're smart, you'll get out of here and not come back."

Otherwise, you'll leave this room in bodybags." There was a definite threat to his words, and the Marines practically scrambled to get past them. Laura watched them go, and collapsed into shivers as soon as they were gone; she was cold, exhausted, scared for her niece, and unable to look John in the eye after the words she'd said to him on Christmas Eve. Linda walked over and began checking her for any wounds. She certainly looked like she was in bad shape: her dark hair was wet and limp, she was shaking badly, and her eyes darted nervously in every direction.

"No need, Linda, I'm not hurt. I'm just trying to recover from hypothermia." She looked around quickly, suddenly worried for her young niece. "Katrina, did they get to my niece?" Will shook his head.

"Door's still closed the way you left it."

"Thank goodness. I doubt I could have kept them away from her in the state I'm in." She felt her legs beginning to give out, and sat down on the edge of her bed, yanking the blanket off and wrapping it snugly around her. "Thanks for dropping in. If you hadn't come when you did" she stopped, imagining how much worse things could have gotten.

"We heard you and your family were skating, so we decided to keep an eye on things," Fred smirked. Of course, he would find it amusing that I couldn't fight them off. "Why didn't you just take her to the base hospital?" If I didn't know better, I'd say he was concerned.

"Too far away. I knew I only had a little time before Katrina froze to death. My parka would only have prolonged the timeframe a little while, even though it was dry. This was the closest place I could think of, and I knew enough shortcuts to get here as soon as I could." She felt a bit of warmth in her legs and decided to try standing again; she managed to stand up, and grinned a little sheepishly.

"I hate to ask, but would you mind turning while I get myself semi-presentable?" They turned around, and Laura pulled on the first pair of warm sweats she could find. She then went into the bathroom and checked on her niece. Katrina was a little scared, but seemed reassured that everything was all right. Laura decided to leave her in there; she'd be happier that way, and it would give her time to talk to the Spartans in some comfort. She led them to her kitchen area, where she had managed to squeeze in a small, portable kitchen range and a microwave.

"Would you like a hot drink? I know I could use some hot tea or something." Laura smiled at the sight of four Spartans shaking their heads in unison, and filled a ceramic mug with water. She stuck it in the microwave, waited while it heated, and steeped a teabag into the steaming water when it was finished heating; the scent of chamomile filled the room, relaxing everyone who smelled it. Sipping the transparent yellow brew, Laura closed her eyes and felt the warmth pour through her entire body, a pleasant feeling after the icy pond. The chamomile also had a soothing effect on her nerves, and she felt the tension from earlier begin to unwind.

"Are you sure you don't want anything? I have other things besides

chamomile and hot chocolate to offer." She swore she saw the shadow of a smile on a few faces.

"No thank you. Are you sure it's wise to leave your niece alone?" Fred remarked pointedly.

"I'm never alone in here. I thought Nicole introduced you to my constant companion." Her eyebrow arched up in amusement at their faces. "We have no secrets, Nick and I. Besides, Lorienna would have told me if Nicole hadn't. Now that I'm getting some functionality back into my limbs, I'll be ready for trouble if Lorienna sees anything out of place."

"Besides us being in here?" John muttered, trying hard to seem indifferent, with his voice coming out unnecessarily harsh and earning him a sharp look from Linda.

"Yeah, besides that, obviously," Laura replied dryly. "If you were going to kill me you would have done it long before now, or you would have let those Marines do the job." A faint smile appeared on her face. "You're never going to believe this, but each time I went up against one of you in close combat, I came close to losing." They stared at her in amazement, and she nodded. "I don't like having to use methods others don't know during a fair fight, but I had no choice, especially with the bullet hole I had in my shoulder when I was facing off with Fred. As it was, if all of you had come after me, I would most definitely have lost."

"Bullet hole?" Linda asked, remembering shooting at a sniper as he faded away into the trees.

"Your accuracy isn't confined to the sniper rifle, Linda. You hit me as I made my escape, and it hurt like hell for weeks afterwards. If you had aimed any lower, we wouldn't be having this conversation." A dark look passed in front of her eyes. "And you wondered why I was so paranoid? Now you pretty much know it all."

A knock on the door brought the conversation a much-needed reprieve, as Laura got up to answer the door.

"Hey Angela. We got her here in time."

"Where is she?"

"Back in the bathroom, soaking and splashing worse than I did at her age."

"From what I've heard that's no great achievement." Laura laughed at that, the lilting sound carrying back to the Spartans' ears and surprising them. Each remembered something Nicole had said to them, shortly before they'd saved her life the first time: _I've heard her real laughter, It's so much different than this; it has more music to it._ As Laura preceded her sister-in-law to the bathroom, they saw a broad smile spread to every corner of her mouth. A few moments later, she and her relatives reappeared, the little girl wrapped in several towels and blankets.

"Drive home safely, Angie."

"Always, Laura. Take care."

Laura returned to her guests, the shadow of a smile still lingering on her face. _It's so much more attractive when she smiled,_ John thought privately to himself. He kept his voice carefully controlled as he looked at Laura.

"Why didn't your AI tell you the intruders were here?"

"Probably because I was busy keeping ONI out of Laura's files," a disembodied voice replied as a small figure in blue and silver swirled into place near a computer terminal. "Ackerson is getting more curious of late, especially now that you've perfected the portable shield generators. It's actually a bit creepy the way he's trying to get into your files."

"What's the bastard up to now?" Laura muttered darkly, her voice containing undeniable hate and anger.

"He managed to sneak into your journal using piggybacked signals, child's play really, but I got preoccupied with a file and didn't catch it in time. Once he realized the encryption, he tried to insert a virus into my systems; fortunately I was able to catch _that_ one before it did any damage."

"Oh really? Tell me, Lorienna," Laura's voice was thick with disapproval, "what was so engrossing that you let down your guard?" A stream of runic text scrolled across the terminal, Laura reading it like it was plain English; the Spartans recognized it as the encryption on her private files. "Ah, I see. This _does_ bear looking into." She turned to her guests.

"I'm afraid I'll have to cut this short. There's something that I need to check on." They caught her meaning and got ready to leave. She seemed to hesitate for a moment, then spoke in a more contrite voice than they'd ever heard from her. "Thank you for saving me."

"Not everyone can take care of themselves," John spoke brusquely. She seemed a bit taken aback by his words, but returned them with equal brusqueness.

"I'll keep that in mind. Good day." As she shut the door, she wondered why it hurt her so to have him say that. _He hates me now. Good. That will keep him safe. So why did it hurt so much?_

Linda looked shrewdly at the Master Chief as they left Blade's quarters. _Something's not right_, she thought. _He was never this brittle on Reach, and once he got here, he was fine. What's changed?_ An answer seemed to come up out of nowhere, an answer that seemed ridiculous but fit the facts. _Impossible, but in this case likely_, she thought. _I'll need to ask him one of these days._

****January 10, 2552 1600 hours****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Some time later, Nicole found herself wandering through the base looking for the Master Chief. _Laura's on a mission right now, so

this is the perfect time to do this._ She didn't find the Chief, but she did find Linda. _Just as good._

"Ma'am, I was wondering if I could have a word with you later," she asked, sounding more hesitant than she would have liked.

"What about?" Linda seemed skeptical. Nicole looked around, made sure that no one else was in hearing range, and lowered her voice to make doubly sure only Linda heard.

"It's aboutâ€¦it's about Laura, and the Master Chief too, in a way. I can't say more here."

She looked around one more time, and muttered, "Meet me at my place in two hours, or as close to it as you can. It's important." Looking around one more time, Nicole left the room, scared by what she was doing but knowing it was the right thing to do.

****Mitchell Residence 1827 hours****

****North America****

Two hours later, both women were sitting in front of a computer terminal as Nicole entered commands. _Thank goodness she left Lorienta behind on this one_, she thought to herself as the files finally opened. Scrolling down to Shrieking Eagles, Nicole opened it, decrypted it, and scrolled down to a fairly new entry, dated December 26th.

Well, I suppose there are worse ways to spend Christmas, but at this point I can safely say that this was my worst Christmas yet. I went out at midnight Christmas Day to put a centerpiece together for the morning, and the Master Chief was awake. We exchanged a few words, and then I don't know what happened next. Somehow I wound up in his arms, for all intents and purposes, even though neither of us had any intention of doing that. He kissed me, and what's even worse, I kissed him! By the time I realized what was going on, I had to put a stop to it. Neither of us could take back the kiss, but I did what I could to make him hate me. I can't let him care about me. At this point, it's fairly clear he feels something, but by now I think I've altered that. I broke away and spoke coldly to him, trying to make him hate me. I think it worked; at any rate he gave me the cold shoulder from that point on. This is good: his hating me will protect him from ONI, which will make it all worthwhile. I just wish it didn't hurt so much. Anyway, on a brighter note, Katrina loved the flute I carved her for Christmas. Now I'll have to teach her how to play; this should be interesting.'

"I don't understand," Linda muttered as she finished reading the journal entry. "Why would she intentionally try to push someone away?"

"My creator cares too much about the people she loves," Lorienta spoke up. "When she loves or cares about anything, she does so completely; when Laura loves anyone, she loves with all her heart. If she thinks distancing herself from others will protect them, she will do it without hesitation. You may recall a similar circumstance a couple months ago, when ONI tried to use her family as blackmail. However, I think there is something more in this instance."

"More? What do you mean, Lorienna?" Nicole was puzzled, trying to figure out what she had missed.

"Fear, perhaps?"

"Good point." Nicole stared off into space for a long period of time, thinking. "Do you think she's afraid of loving him, or afraid to love and lose?"

"Perhaps a bit of both. Of course, the best way would be to ask her when she returns."

"No, not yet." Nicole turned to the Spartan sitting next to her.

"This is why I was looking for the Master Chief earlier. I felt he deserved to know, especially after I figured out what exactly had happened. Lorienna saw the whole thing, since she keeps her eyes open all the time. I'm not going to show you, but I just thought he should know. Since I couldn't find him, well, you were the only one around, so I came to you."

"What do you want me to do?" Linda asked quietly. Having seen part of what Laura was going through, and now connecting her journal entry with the incident in her bunkhouse a while back, she understood now why John had been so cold with her, and why she'd returned his coldness.

"At this point, nothing. I had intended to tell the Master Chief, but after thinking it over I realize that might be a bad idea. If he finds out, it might make him angry. If there was anything I could do to assist them, I would, but that can't be done, at least not by me. Besides, Laura really hates it when people try to play Cupid." She smiled, recalling all the times she had tried to pair Laura with her older brother.

"You should probably be going," Lorienna interrupted. "It would do you no good to be caught outside of the base. Keep on your toes as well: ONI can be very sneaky."

"I'll keep that in mind," Linda muttered as she walked out the door. _So that's what's going on,_ she thought. _Better not tell the others just yet, but I'll keep an eye on John, see if he really does feel something, and see whether or not Laura managed to root everything out. Something tells me she may not have been successful, but we'll see._

28. Chapter 27: Double Trouble

The last appearance of the pissed-off Elite, who finally gets his revenge! Also featuring a squad of ODSTs on leave and pissed off. Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Double Trouble

****March 4, 2553 1527 hours****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Laura had had an extremely rough day, having been tormented at the hands of Col. Ackerson and several squads of Helljumpers. No matter how many times she tried to explain that she was no traitor, she always got attacked. It sickened her to have to fight her fellow soldiers, but she had no choice. Although, the past few months had been quiet, almost too quiet, which probably only added to her jitters; she was still waiting for the other shoe to drop, since ONI never slacked off without a reason. She'd been kept on base lately, and her contact with the other Spartans had been limited for some reason: a few minor commando strikes, but nothing else. Most of the time, she was left alone, and for some reason that worried her.

The walk back to her quarters was quiet enough, but something about it made her uneasy. She felt a prickling sensation along her spine, as if someone were alternately trickling hot and cold water down her back. It was a feeling she got whenever she felt like she was walking into an ambush, and it only intensified when she saw a blood trail on the path: faint, but heading towards her quarters. Laura ran down the path as quickly as she could, only to find a huddled, bleeding mass on her doorstep. It was Nicole Mitchell, her only real friend, bruised and bleeding from multiple wounds. It was clear that she'd been beaten harshly for some time, and that the wounds, while not fresh, had been inflicted not more than two hours before.

"Nicole! What happened?" _Sweet heaven, please tell me ONI didn't go after her!_

"Laura, is it you? Don't come closer, you don't want to see what they did."

"Like hell. You need to get help. Can you walk?"

Nicole stood shakily, her legs trembling as though unable to support her weight. Laura helped her friend into her quarters and drew a warm bath for her.

"Here, just clean yourself up and rest in the water. I'll see about some food and some proper help. Did you see who did this?"

"I didn't see their faces, but I saw their shoulders. Their names I couldn't read, but they had patches. Gold comets."

Damn! "I'll get help. You were attacked by ODSTs, Nicole, Helljumpers. We're going to need a lot of help to bring them down. In the meantime, don't drain the tub: they may have left DNA behind when they attacked you. I'll take care of everything else."

Two hours later, Laura sat in her living room with General West, her mother, and a freshly washed Nicole. Dr. Gedeon had examined her thoroughly and documented all her findings, while West questioned her extensively about the attack. Laura, meanwhile, was pouring hot chamomile tea for Nicole, herself and her mother, waiting for the end of the session. When it arrived, Laura waited for the verdict.

"Well, Laura, you showed some remarkable foresight when you left the water in the tub; there was a lot of DNA evidence in there."

Unfortunately, with the war and all, I'm not sure what kind of investigation I'll be able to conduct, or what kind of punishment will be dished out. I promise I'll do what I can." West's promise was hollow, because of the war: there really wasn't anything that could be done, outside of public censure and demotion of the parties responsible. Laura knew it, but was still grateful for the support

"Thank you, sir. We really appreciate it. I just wonder if this isn't my fault in some way. They may have come after her because she's my friend."

"That may be the case, but it wasn't your fault. These are Marines, and they should know better than to attack civilians, especially human civilians." He turned to Nicole. "Miss Mitchell, we'll need you to come down to the base again tomorrow." Nicole nodded, silently afraid of what might happen.

Laura escorted her friend out of the courtrooms on base, shaking her head in astonishment. _Nothing is being done! Damn ONI,_ she thought in disgust. _I should have seen this coming!_ As they cleared the steps, Laura noticed Nicole stiffen almost perceptibly. She followed her friend's gaze to a squad of ODSs standing nearby, and touched her arm lightly.

"Nick, look at me. Don't look at them, ignore them and walk past them as if they don't matter." Nicole nodded, but the Helljumpers weren't going to let them off so easily. They walked right up to the two friends and blocked their path.

"So, come to sow a few lies, eh, traitor?" the leader sneered. Laura bristled, but her main concern was for her friend.

"I came to see justice done, and saw it denied again. Civilians have no part in this war," Laura replied pointedly, trying to push past them and get her friend to safety. The lead Helljumper tried to grab Nicole and separate her from her friend. When she realized this, Laura whipped her elbow around and caught the man in the shoulder, inwardly wincing as his bones broke audibly. Facing the remaining members of the group, she gave them the ugliest look any of them had ever seen; judging by the sudden foul smell that assailed her nose, Laura had scared one of the younger ones really badly.

"Now you listen to me, all of you. I don't give a damn what you fools do to me, but keep your grudges with me. Don't bring innocents into it, or so help me I will personally make sure you regret it. Leave my family and friends alone, and if you have a problem with me, bring it to me." Laura helped Nicole back to her feet and escorted her out of the base, away from the ODSs who would have hurt her.

****March 10, 2553 1135 hours****

****Mitchell Residence****

****North America****

The Master Chief had been following Laura for quite a while, on Colonel Ackerson's orders; he had been told Laura had been feeding information to the Covenant, and had been sent to watch her. Normally a Spartan wouldn't be assigned to this kind of covert op, but

Ackerson seemed to think he'd be best equipped to defend himself if she were to turn on him; he also had a decent amount of experience at being stealthy, given his experiences on HALO. And so, for three months he'd been shadowing Laura, and during that period of time had begun wondering why he was watching her in the first place. When he had been given the assignment, he'd wondered about the accusations, but his doubts had been pushed to the back of his mind: not only did the orders come directly from ONI's brass, but he'd still been angry with her for playing with his emotions. He had felt like he'd been used, and so he'd taken the assignment. At that time he had obeyed without question, and sent regular reports of Laura's doings to ONI, but now he wasn't so sure. Whenever she was on base, she acted the part of a bitter, angry soldier, but the mask came off once she was sure she was alone; he'd actually seen her crying on more than one occasion. A bug in her quarters revealed that her 'hacking' was usually limited to doings about the war: the latest reports on Covenant technologies, mostly, but with the occasional mission report. Of course, he never mentioned the AI she had, since she'd helped save their bacon from ONI at one point. Thinking about that instance, when they'd gone after Laura to keep her away from ONI, he wondered why she had so quickly allowed them to take her, and why she'd decided to help them.

Now that he thought about it, he couldn't recall any instance where Laura had demonstrated any behaviors to indicate treachery. True, she could be being extremely careful, but his instincts said otherwise. _This smells like a set-up. She doesn't seem like the treacherous type,_ he mused. _Why did I even believe Ackerson anyway?_ The answer hit him like a ton of bricks: he'd been hurt, and he'd wanted to hurt her back.

Realizing he was approaching the Mitchell residence, and that his quarry had entered the house, John pulled himself to a halt and took cover. He was just in time: Laura and her friend Nicole were just leaving Nicole's house with a basket in one hand and a dog leash in the other. Laura whistled, a clear note puncturing the air. At the sound a familiar-looking, red-gold mass came rocketing around the side of the house, long pink tongue at the ready.

"Hey, Skeeter-butt! How're we doing today?"

"I think he's just happy to see you." Nicole smiled at the way the little corgi kept jumping up and putting his muddy paws on Laura's pant leg, trying desperately to slobber all over her face. Laughing fit to burst, Laura bent down and scooped up the wriggling mass of fur and muscle, garnering some face licks in the process before safely depositing him in her friend's car. The two women followed Skeeter into the car shortly, and they headed off; the Chief followed at a safe distance. He'd managed to bug the car a few weeks earlier, so he could listen to the conversation; this one proved to be surprising, for him at least.

"I'm glad to see you doing better, Nick. It still makes me sick to think what those ODST's did to you."

"Don't worry, what goes around comes around, remember? So, how're things on the base?"

"Same as always. ODSTs trying to kill me off, Ackerson trying to assassinate me, typical general chaos."

"You sure? Nothing you want to tell me?" _She's trying to bait her_, the Chief realized.

"Nothing really of consequence."

"Oh, really?" Nicole paused for a moment; when she spoke again her tone was more straightforward. "What's his name?"

"How--"

"Laura, you keep forgetting I can read you like a book most of the time. There's been a change in you over the past few months: you've gotten sadder and quieter than usual. So who is he?"

"His name is John."

"John. Does he have a last name?"

"No ideaâ€¦ yet."

"Is heâ€¦?" Nicole's voice was laced with disbelief.

"Yes. He's one of them. I can't let him find out how I feel, and it's a pretty safe bet that he feels nothing for me. So either way, I'm stuck in _another_ Catch-22, which is the last thing I need at the moment."

"Damn. That has to suck."

"Tell me about it." From her quiet, resigned tone of voice, it seemed as if the unshakeable Blade had been shaken: she sounded like she'd given up.

The car finally stopped near a wooded area. Parking it next to the road, they got out; Laura held Skeeter just long enough to clip the leash to his collar, trying and failing to dodge his tongue at the same time, then put him down. Nicole pulled out the basket, and the Master Chief followed them into the forest. After a short walk they entered a good-sized clearing in the forest, most of which was taken up by a small pond. He'd seen it in the winter, when he and the other Spartans had watched Laura and her family ice-skating; it was surprising what a difference the change of season made. Nicole spread out a blanket on the grass while Laura unpacked the basket and Skeeter ran all over the place, trailing his leash out behind him like the tail he never had. Suddenly he began to bark loudly, punctuated by an occasional growl. Nicole looked up and stared in surprise at the barking corgi: she'd never seen anything bother the little furball that badly before.

"Skeeter, what on earth?"

"Relax, Nicole, he's probably just found a squirrel or something." After a moment of staring intensely where Skeeter was barking, and a subtle movement of something on the blanket that the Master Chief barely noticed, Laura slapped a hand to her forehead.

"Nicole, I forgot Skeeter's bone! I left it in the car when we parked."

"Don't worry, I'll go get it."

"Hey, while you're going that way anyway, could you take these back too?" She pulled a chain from around her neck, a chain with two wedding bands on it that had been left to her by her grandmother, and pressed it into Nicole's hand. "I don't want to risk losing them while I swim."

"No problem. Come on, Skeeter." Nicole paused and looked intently at her friend, noticing the troubled look in her dark eyes. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing, really, I'll be alright. I promise."

When they had left the glade, Laura pulled out the bone from where she'd hidden it and placed it in the center of the blanket. She then spoke out clearly.

"I know you're hiding there, so do what you came here to do. Now that my friends are safe I will not stop you." She heard a rush of noise behind her, felt something hit the back of her head, and then all was black silence.

Maro 'Iramee had finally tracked this elusive human to this small planet, which seemed to hold little strategic value in his eyes. He waited in a wooded area as two humans approached the watery place nearby. One was the human he sought, but the other was different from her in every way. Both seemed to be laughing happily, as a diminutive furry creature raced around them. The little creature suddenly stopped in front of him and began making loud noises. After a time, the little creature was called away by the other human female. Strangely enough, she left the place, leaving his elusive quarry behind. The human then spoke clearly.

"I know you're hiding there, so do what you came to do. Now that my friends are safe I will not stop you."

'Iramee had no time to wonder how his quarry had known he was hiding nearby, or why she called those others her friends. All he had time to do was strike the human and drag her to his ship. _If other vermin discover this, I will never receive the rewards of the Prophets, and I will die on this wretched world._ Finally getting her to the ship, he began the launch sequence and prepared to fulfill his duties.

The Master Chief could only watch as Laura was knocked unconscious by a camouflaged Elite, who carried her off into the surrounding trees; as much as he wanted to race after the Elite, pound him to a bloody pulp and rescue a fellow Spartan, his orders were clear: observe only, do not interfere, avoid confrontation, in short stay hidden. In that instance of indecision, the Elite had vanished. A moment later he heard the sound of a ship taking off, but saw nothing when he looked up into the open space between the trees. _A stealth ship! But why go to all that unlessâ€¦ unless they wanted only one person. _His stomach clenched with cold fear. _They were after her, and she knew! That's why she sent Nicole away!_ A moment later, Nicole returned and saw the bone. The Chief stepped out and showed himself.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was supposed to keep an eye on Laura. She sent you away because

there was a Covenant commando in the trees. He's gone now; he got what he came for."

"The Covenant have Laura? What are we going to do?"

"I'll get her back, Miss Mitchell. I promise." _Screw my orders, I never leave a teammate behind_, he thought angrily. He didn't dare think of the other reason for going after her, he needed a clear head.

29. Chapter 28: Captured Part I

Hey all! Sorry it took so long for this latest update, but my computer's been acting up a bit! Anyway, Blade is currently in a bit of a pickle, so how does she handle it? Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Captured Part I

****March 10, 2553 1942 hours****

****Unknown Covenant warship****

****Unknown System****

Several hours later, Laura began to return to consciousness. She left her eyes shut, feeling that it was safer to pretend to be out of it until she could ascertain what was what. As far as she could tell, she was on her back on a cold metal floor, her head was throbbing most unpleasantly, and there were a number of voices around her. All the voices were human, and all of them were nervous.

"I can't seem to wake her. They must've had to hit her hard."

"Knowing Blade, I wouldn't be surprised. She probably put up one hell of a fight."

"What do you think they want with her? They can't know she's a Spartan, can they?"

"Speculation isn't going to do any good, since we're all stuck here. Let's see if we can find a way out. How are our wounded doing?"

"Not so good. If we don't get them treated soon, they'll be dead before we can get out of this hellhole."

Laura's aching head finally put the facts together, not liking the conclusion: the Covenant had taken her captive, and she was now trapped in a cell with a number of other human prisoners, some of which were injured pretty badly. _This could get real ugly, real fast. Better play it by ear for now._ She heard footsteps stop in front of the cell and a number of her fellow prisoners retreating to the back. Still feigning unconsciousness, Laura sensed something stoop over her, smelt a foul odor and felt a weapon against her arm. She reacted quickly, with the speed only a Spartan was capable of, grabbing the weapon and putting it to the Elite's head as she twisted behind him; she trapped his legs with her own and snaked one arm around both of his, effectively immobilizing him while she pressed

the plasma rifle deeper into his skull. Laura smirked at the Prophet on the other side of the cell doorway.

"I wouldn't try anything funny if I were you. If you try to send in more guards, I'll kill this one and use him as a shield, and then we'll have a weapon and a way out. Now, shall we talk about this peaceably, or do I need to aim at your head? I'd hate to have to resort to extremes."

"How dare you speak to me, vermin!" The Prophet's voice was filled with rage, but secretly he was afraid: the Elite she held at gunpoint was one of his most loyal and influential followers, one of the few who was able to maintain discipline among the lesser Elites with ease. To lose him to the human vermin would weaken his power base considerably.

"You are no more vermin than I am, so if you call me vermin, then that is what you are," Laura replied smoothly, her voice concealing the fury that burned within her. "We're really a lot alike, smart, arrogant, and each fearful of the other. Now, perhaps we can come to an arrangement."

"Blade, what the hell are you doing?" a fear-crazed Marine sputtered.

"Trying to save our necks." She didn't take her eyes off the Prophet. When she spoke again, her voice was hard and cold. "I want food, water, and medical care for these soldiers. And until we receive them, I'll be keeping your aide as a hostage. Don't worry, he won't be harmed. Once we receive food and proper medical treatment, I'll let him go. Yet I shouldn't need a hostage, for even you must know that living prisoners are far more valuable than dead ones."

"I shall consider your request." The Prophet left. Before allowing the Elite to sit down, Laura relieved him of his plasma rifle and pistol, tossing them to other prisoners.

"Keep an eye on him."

"Blade, why are we even sitting here? We could've gotten off this ship!"

"And just where would we have gone? We have no food or water, no knowledge of how to find our way around the inside this ship, and no idea how to fly one of their ships. Even if we did, the smaller ships don't have a Slipspace drive. We'd have gotten out of here only to die. At least here we have a slightly better chance of survival, for the time being. By negotiating with that Prophet, I may have bought us enough time to find a way to get home. If nothing else, it'll ensure our survival."

"Which does us no good if they plan to torture us to death."

"What would you rather I'd done, signed our death warrants? I'll find us a way out or die trying, that I can guarantee." She recognized a number of her tormenters on Earth who were in the cell with her, as well as several ODSs. "Still think I'm a traitoress? If I were, I'd still be on Earth gathering intel for the Covenant. Not that they really need it anyway, the fact that they've got me here proves it."

"How did they catch you, anyway?" a young Navy captain asked.

"I allowed them to take me, because if I had fought back a good person might have been hurt. Even though I sent her away on a false errand, she could have heard any sound of combat and come back to try and help me. I needed to buy time for her to get out of the danger zone," Laura replied slowly, almost hesitantly, not knowing what they're reactions would be.

"You allowed them to kidnap you, just to save someone's life?" an ODST asked incredulously.

"For Nicole Mitchell, I'd do a hell of a lot more."

A few hours later, food and medical supplies were brought to the prisoners, at which point Laura allowed the Elite to leave the cell, minus his weapons. She knew very little about the supplies provided, but did what she could to treat the wounded. When a young private went into shock, she had no way to treat it; the only alternative was to slap his face to bring him around, which she did—actually, she drafted one of the other prisoners to do it, since her enhanced strength could easily have killed the kid. When the other prisoners slept, Laura kept watch alone, in case any Covenant soldiers decided to have fun with an unsuspecting prisoner; when she was tending the wounded, she made sure someone was keeping watch at the door. Over time, the prisoners grew stronger, and began to respect the soldier they used to call Blade the traitoress. They finally began to understand what made her tick: it wasn't hatred of humanity or the twisted alterations that ONI had done to her, but a thirst to prove herself human.

One night--or day, they'd begun to lose track of time inside the cell--Laura looked at her fellow prisoners. There was a grim look in her eyes as she glanced at the door of their cell.

"I think our captors are beginning to think about pumping us for information. I also think I'll be the first one they take: by destroying the leader, they conquer the followers. It's a common enough strategy, and also effective."

"Then what do you want us to do?"

"Do nothing, say nothing. If Earth falls, we lose a lot more than our home: we lose our families, our history, and our cultures. Remember, you are Marines, you swore an oath to defend Earth no matter the cost."

"What about you?"

"Me?" She snorted derisively, and spoke dryly enough to give off an air of not caring, but failed to hide the hurt look in her eyes. "I never existed, didn't you realize that? ONI erased my past as soon as I was conscripted at the ripe old age of four. I have no one who'll really miss me enough to ask where I am, no one who even knows my name. Only a few people know the truth about me, and they can't say or do anything to help me. Dying will be no big deal for me; I've been dead for almost 30 years." She laughed humorlessly. "As much as you hate me, it'll be easy for you to watch me die."

No sooner did she say this than a number of Covenant soldiers entered the room. Laura waited in the cell with her fellow prisoners in the Covenant cell, eyeing the approaching Elites. _Only twelve? I'm insulted._ She knew, though, that if she acted, her fellow prisoners would most likely die. As the Elites approached, she went to the force field and stared them down.

"What do you want, come to torture us for information? It will do no good."

"You will come with us," the lead Elite boomed, his voice uneasy with her language. Realizing she had no real choice, she walked out with them, following them to a control center where a Prophet and several armed warriors waited; some of the aliens looked like overgrown and extremely vicious monkeys. The monkey aliensâ€"whom she now remembered were called 'Brutes'--grabbed her and held her tightly, too tightly, but she didn't even try to struggle, especially when she saw the headset they were bringing out. _Ha, this'll backfire_, Laura thought. She kept her face neutral as they jammed the device on her. The Prophet raised his claws to the ceiling and cried out a blessing she didn't understand, and the device was activated. The first thing they saw was a memory from her childhood:

She was bending over the lip of a large chest freezer, moving various frozen foods about, looking for frozen chicken. The door closed on top of her, since she didn't have the proper angle to hold it upright safely. Before she realized it, she was trapped in the freezer, with only her legs hanging out.

"Hey, help! Somebody get down here, I'm stuck!"

A thudding of feet became audible as her younger brother rushed downstairs. He let out a surprised burst of laughter. "What the heck?"

"Matt, just open the door and get me out of here!" She fought her annoyance as her brother rushed back upstairs, and then down again. There was a clicking, whirring noise, and then a hand gripped the freezer door and pulled it up. She glared at her younger brother, her mother standing just behind him, and at the camera she was holding.

"Not cool, Matt," she grumbled as she retrieved the chicken she'd found before the door had closed on her.

Almost as soon as that memory floated past, another one came into focus; while pleasant, this one was touched by sadness.

It was two days before she was scheduled to leave for the final phase of her training: the augmentation. She couldn't bear to think of leaving without saying goodbye to one of her dearest friends, and she knew it would be hard for both of them. Approaching the stables, she pulled out her panpipes and began to play, the lilting yet haunting tones carrying through the air. She turned the corner and saw a golden mare with dark brown mane and tail streaking to the fence.

_"Hello, dear Corona," she smiled as she held out her hand: sitting in her open palm were some sugar cubes, a special treat. The mare eagerly accepted, then nuzzled her hand. She seemed to realize her

human friend was troubled, and nudged her gently._

"Corona, I'll be going away for a while," she whispered softly, running one hand along the golden coat. "I'll come back, but I'll beâ€|different. Needless to say, I'll be much too heavy to ride you anymore." A single tear rolled down her face as she contemplated what lay ahead of her. The mare nudged her shoulder gently, and she smiled.

"Dear friend, I'll be leaving in two days' time. I promise I'll still come visit you, but for nowâ€|" her dark eyes twinkled. "â€|how about one last ride?"

The golden mare reared up, neighing loudly, and jumped the fence in three quick strides. A gentle trot brought her back, and she nudged her shoulder again.

Mounting up bareback, she gently nudged her equine friend into a canter, a canter which soon changed to a furious gallop as they reached open plains. Her hair whipped out behind her like the horse's mane, and she crouched low along the mare's back. Their motions combined, until it seemed almost as one creature, one being. She knew that dark times lay ahead of her, but for this single, brief moment, she was free.

Laura opened her eyes as the memory faded, smirking at the Prophet. "So much for levity. How about something a little darker?"

Dark eyes scanned the forest around her as she moved towards the center of the rebel base. Her objective was the release of a captured military general, who had been exfiltrated some time ago. Years of training in stealth allowed her to blend in with the shadows as she made her way across the compound. The brig was nearby; ONI had provided accurate plans and layouts of the base. It all seemed too easy, but then again, most of them were. She still kept her eyes open, though; anything was possible in situations like these. Spotting her building, she slipped over to the doorway and began to pick the lock. Once inside, it was a simple matter to subdue the guards and move quietly down the cell block. She peered into every cell, looking for her objective. Finally, she found him, sleeping in a corner of his cell, back to a wall. The door was locked, of course, but for good measure there was also an unusually sophisticated motion-sensor system. Getting past that would be tough. She peered through the bars and whistled softly.

"General, wake up. Wake up, sir." The prisoner stirred, opening his eyes slightly, and started when he saw her there.

"What the hell? Who are you?"

"Your ticket out of here. Just give me a minute to figure out this motion sensor and we'll be gone." She looked hard at the device: custom made, and a very clever piece of work at that; none of the standard techniques would work here. Scanning the cell carefully, she wondered if there wasn't a way to bypass the device completely; without cutting tools, she couldn't cut a hole through the bars and lift him out, so the only option was to create a 'back door'.

_"Sir, I can't disable this thing. I'll come around and let you out

from the rear. Get away from the west wall and wait for it."_

A few minutes later, she'd planted small amounts of C-4 explosive around the west wall of the general's cell. A pull on a remote blew a nice hole in the wall, and the general ran through.

"My apologies, sir, but I can get us out faster this way," she muttered and scooped the man over her shoulder, bolting for the perimeter she'd broken through earlier. Running to the Prowler she'd landed a few kilometers away, she heard gunfire behind her; not stopping for a moment, she bolted through the hatch and started the launch sequence, triggered the autopilot, and checked her passenger. He'd been hit as she'd run, and he was bleeding badly. She treated his wounds as best she could, and prayed they'd make it back in time.

The ship made it back to Earth in record time, and her passenger was taken for treatment. She breathed a sigh of relief: he was going to fine. As she relaxed, she saw an older man coming towards her; he looked mad.

"Blade, what the hell happened? How did he get hurt?"

"The rebels got smarter since the last scouting mission: they rigged a custom motion sensor in his cell, and there was no way I could get past it. I had to blow his cell, and carry him out of the base. They were shooting as I got to the Prowler, and I had no idea he'd been hit until after we cleared orbit."

"Does your incompetence know no bounds?" the man bellowed and then stalked away, leaving her upset and angry, though she knew not to show it. Better to pretend she felt nothing for now.

"Surprise, surprise," Laura smirked at her captors. "Never thought we'd see such similarities in our governments, eh?" Then a new memory drifted in front of her, one she hadn't anticipated: her testing of a similar memory device on a cruiser she and the Spartans had captured, her discovery of the Forerunner scientist's memories in her mind. _Oh no you don't, you're not seeing all of that_, she thought, and managed to stop the outflow, how she didn't know.

"Heresy!" the Prophet exclaimed.

"Hardly heresy, I certainly didn't imagine this scenario to be the case," Laura pointed out dryly. "You saw it for yourself, and if there's one, there must be more that I don't know." Then a new memory, one she definitely hadn't expected and certainly hadn't seen before, appeared before their eyes.

The young woman was working feverishly, her dark eyes sparkling with intensity as she finished the modifications to the circlet she was crafting. After finishing the work, she set it on her head, waited for a brief while, and removed it, a disappointed look on her face. So intent on her work, she never noticed the old Prophet behind her, watching, always watching.

"That did not work at all, so I must try again. Perhaps if the neuron flows were reversed and the electrical impulses were a bit higherâ€¦ I must get it working first; once it works refinements can be made later. There, that's done, now see if it works."

She placed the circlet on her head and connected it to a holographic terminal. Once that was done, she thought of her beloved mother.

**'Ama, Ama, wake up! Father's looking for you! Ama! Ama!' the child kept shaking her mother and calling, but the woman did not stir. The girl's crying brought her father in an instant, and there was a look on his face that scared her.**

She pulled off the headset, tears running silently down her face; she had forgotten that long ago, but now it had returned to haunt her. Shaking her dark head, she happened to notice the Prophet waiting in the doorway.

_ "My apologies!" she stammered. "I had thought this laboratory was no longer in use. Forgive me; I will go elsewhere." _

_ "This place is no longer used, child, but that does not mean no one ever comes in here," the Prophet's voice was stern and grave. "A standard maintenance check revealed that someone was using this place periodically, so we waited to see who it would be. What are you doing here, without leave?" _

_ "I was trying to create something, sir," she said as she bowed her head in respect; she knew this old Prophet was a much-respected scientist, and felt awkward standing in his presence. "When I tried to obtain leave to work, they held off my request and it was forgotten. I thought since no one used this laboratory, I would be able to work without disturbing any other works." _

_ "We shall discuss this later. What is your project?" The Prophet floated to the worktable and picked up the device, examining it with interest._

_ "I was hoping to create a memory device: a way for people who have lost their memories to find them again. My mother was a healer, and I learned quickly what happens to those who are too old, and how much they hated it sometimes. I wanted to help them remember." _

_ "A noble effort, child, but how do you imagine being able to accomplish this on your own? Why did you not bring a proposal to the other scientists?" _

_ "They would have laughed, no doubt. Besides, why promise results when there's a strong chance of failure? I had no idea that this would work, and was reluctant to say anything until I was sure. Failure comes with science, but shame is horrible to endure." _

_ "Indeed. It is remarkable for a young human such as yourself to have come so far on your own. You are new to this field?" _

_She smiled a little at that. "In a sense, yes, and in another, no. My mother taught me much before she passed on, but I only achieved my status a few months ago." _

_ "Curious. May I ask who your mother was?" _

_ "Fara, the healer." The old Prophet's dark eyes widened at the name;

Fara was legendary among the scientific and medical communities, and her passing many years ago had been mourned by all. He recalled the funeral ceremony: there had been a warrior and two young children beside the grave._

_ "If Fara was your mother, your father is General Petrarch of the military." The woman nodded. "You come from a good family." _

_ "My thanks, sir," she replied softly._

_ "Please, if you are a scientist you must learn to call others by name." _

_ "We were always taught to be respectful of our elders and better'sâ€|Thaddeus," she said with no small amount of hesitance._

_ "And your name?" Thaddeus asked as the young woman gathered her tools and prepared to leave._

_ "Alaya." _

The memory vanished, leaving several surprised Covenant warriors, and a slightly amused Laura. She was the only one unsurprised by the vision, having seen something similar before.

"Not bad for a heresy, eh? How could I lie if you saw the evidence for yourself?"

"Silence! We will not hear your lies. Remove her," the Prophet commanded. She was picked up and dragged to the cell, and thrown in roughly. Her fellow prisoners looked at her once the Brutes had left, and she had picked herself up.

"What happened?" a Marine asked.

"Attempted interrogation. Let's leave it at that."

30. Chapter 29: Captured Part II

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Captured Part II

Estimated time: March 16, 2553 1302 hours

Unknown Covenant warship

Unknown System

A few days after that, Laura and the others were led at gunpoint to a large hall onboard the ship. The Prophet was there, as were several Brutes and an honor guard of Elites. He surveyed the group of humans, eyes falling coldly on Laura as she stood there defiant to the last. Finally his gaze fell upon one of the most badly wounded in the group. He pointed, and two Brutes moved forward.

Laura realized what was happening, even though she wasn't clear as to

why. All she knew was that she had to act, and she did. She moved with blinding speed, putting herself between the Brutes and the wounded Marine, pushing him down to the deck as her leg kicked out and caught a Brute in the jaw. Striking out like a cobra, her next kick hit him in the head again, and she continued her attack until he was out of action. A few minutes later, a Brute tried to stand her on her head; she locked both feet around his neck and twistedâ€"hard. Bones broke, the Brute fell dead, and Laura dropped to the deck, positioning herself in front of the wounded man again, dark eyes darting around the room.

"Anyone else care for a round?" she snarled, crouching low in a combat stance.

A Brute bellowed, until the Prophet raised a claw. He activated a translator and addressed the large human before him.

"You have defied our soldiers and our ways for the last time, Human."

"I think not. At any rate I'll not see you take anyone less than I for whatever brutality you plan. Why take those who know less, and who would be easy to break? What glory is there in defeating those who never had a chance?" The Marines' eyes widened, especially when they realized the dual purpose to her barbs: she was trying to protect them by taking their place in the torture session while insulting them and angering them enough to make them choose her for death. Her methods worked, and she was taken and held for torture, while they were made to watch. Taking Laura by the arms, they bound her with antigravity collars, effectively holding her in one place; no matter how hard she struggled, she couldn't break free. Two Brutes positioned themselves on either side, armed with spear-type weapons. The torture session was about to begin.

The Prophet questioned her for hours about Earth's defenses, but she gave no answer. Each refusal to speak was rewarded with a stab from the spears, which were electrified and had adjustable voltage output. The Marines were horrified by the grisly session, but shocked and surprised when she maintained her silence. Several times it appeared that one or two of the Marines were going to break, until Laura called out, "Marines! Be strong! _Semper Fidelis!_" The Brutes and the Prophet were clearly losing patience; the 'holy one' ordered the maximum amount of pain. Laura lost her control only then; she broke, but it wasn't anywhere near what the Prophet was hoping for. She screamed in pain, a loud, echoing sound that tore at the hearts of the Marines, and shocked the Covenant. The Prophet's Elite assistant shook his head in amazement.

"Excellency, that was far more pain than a Hunter could have withstood!"

"What kind of human are you?" The Prophet demanded. Laura smiled wearily, a haze of pain clouding her eyes. The last time her entire body had hurt like this had been her augmentations, but even that didn't come close to the pain she felt now. Still she stood, refusing to let the pain show on her face.

"I am a human Hunter, and I fight for my people and my race." She stood tall for a brief moment, a defiant smile on her face, and then her knees buckled just before she collapsed.

She awoke to find her wounds recently tended, with the Covenant medical supplies. She also noticed two new prisoners in the cell: an Elite and a Grunt. The Elite's hands were red with her blood, so she guessed he had treated her wounds. The Elite spoke, the English language uneasy in his mouth.

"You are better?"

"I feel better, thank you. Why are you here?" Her voice sounded scratchy, probably from her shouting and screaming during the torture session.

"Yipin and I disagree with Prophets. They call us heretics, and have planned our execution."

"Just disagreeing with your leaders shouldn't be considered a heresy. The Prophets seem more like tyrants than true leaders. True leaders don't execute people unless they have no other choice." Laura's comments cause the Elite to recoil in what seemed like surprise.

"Many have said that, and none have lived to say it again."

"You will, once we get out of here. I'll find a way out in time, I can promise you that." She groaned as she tried to stand up, and clutched at her sides.

"Brute staves are painful. At most it takes only three jabs to get an enemy to speak. You took over a hundred." It was difficult to tell, but she swore she heard admiration in the Elite's voice.

"I was bred and trained to endure anything, even pain. I'm a survivor."

She staggered to her feet and began looking for a way out, when she heard a loud commotion above her. _If I didn't know better, I'd say that was gunfire, an MA5B assault rifle most likely_.

"Anyone else hear that?" Several people nodded. "I suggest we get back, this could get ugly."

Everyone retreated to the rear of the cell, listening as the noise came nearer. The door of the detention block opened, and the gunfire suddenly got extremely loud. The other Marines closed in around Laura, just in case their rescue tried to kill her as a traitor; they'd seen what happened to her on base, and some of them even regretted taking part in those cruelties. The gunfire continued to come closer, but they couldn't see anything. _Whoever that is, their using active camo, but it's not an Elite, since they don't use assault rifles. _Laura was thinking about the highly remote possibility of one of her brothers coming for her when the camouflage generator was deactivated, revealing a giant in green armor.

"A Spartan! We're saved!"

"Maybe. Let's get off this ship first before we throw a ticker-tape parade."

The Master Chief knew that voice, and was glad to hear that its owner

was still alive, though it didn't show through in his voice. "That you, Blade?"

"About damn time somebody showed up to bust us outta here. What took you so long?"

"Nice to see you too. I've got some gear for you, compliments of a Miss Nicole Mitchell." He pulled a hefty bag off his back and handed it to her. In a matter of minutes Laura had pulled on a blacksuit, a camouflage belt, a portable shield generator, and her blades.

"Ready to kick some ass. How do we get home from here?"

"I've made a few arrangements to get us back to Earth. There's a ship waiting on the edge of the Covenant scanners. If we can get off this ship, we should be able to rendezvous with it."

"Then we'll have to get to the docking bay. But first, we should blow this ship. Get me to the bridge and I'll take care of the rest."

The Chief motioned to the Elite and the Grunt. "What about them?"

"They go with us, seeing as how they saved my life, and they're considered heretics."

The Master Chief shrugged, unwilling to argue with her, and secretly worried about her sluggish movements; normally a graceful person, Laura seemed to be struggling to stay upright. As they headed to the cargo bay, he opened a private COM channel with her from inside the helmet of her suit.

"Are you alright?"

"No. They decided to torture me for information with electric spears. How do you think I feel? I can barely move as it is--there must be some internal injuries, but we don't have time to stop and treat them. We need to get to a shuttle or a dropship and off of this bucket. How'd you find us, anyway?"

"Luck, I think. We can discuss that later, once we get off this ship."

They stopped at the bridge on their way to the cargo bay, in order to start the self-destruct sequence and blow the ship. The room was quite crowded, however, so Laura decided to take matters into her own hands: it was time for her to do what she did best.

"Wait here." Turning on her active camouflage, she moved through the room, a shadow among shadows, a ghost among the living. Laura slipped next to the Elites, silently slitting the throats of the enemy soldiers, until she got nearer to the enemy C&C. A gold-armored Elite (who she guessed to be the Covenant equivalent of a Navy captain) stood there, and happened to hit her with his plasma pistol by chance; once he realized what was there, he lunged to attack. Smoke upon the wind, Laura thought to herself as she dodged her attacker, trying to slit his throat before the Marines got in. Finally, she saw her opening: the Elite had swung too widely, missing her by mere inches, but it was enough for her to plunge one blade deep in his throat. Unfortunately, the Elite brought her down as he fell, which

only aggravated her injuries; in spite of the pain she kept her mouth shut.

"Move up, all clear," Laura muttered into her COM. The Marines filed in and secured the room, as Laura shoved the dead Elite off her and stood up.

"You are all right, human?"

"Fine," Laura muttered, acknowledging the Elite with a nod. "Let's blow this bucket."

Once they were sure the room was secure, Laura began to encrypt the controls and set the self-destruct, with the help of the heretic Elite. It didn't take half as long with the assistance, and in a matter of minutes they were on the move again. By the time they got to the docking bay, though, only five minutes were left on the countdown. Laura was beginning to doubt that they'd make it out alive. As they boarded a dropship, the Elite was shot in the torso; Laura pulled him on the dropship and tried to stop the bleeding with the help of Yipin the heretic Grunt. The Master Chief sat behind the controls of the dropship, trying to get them out of there. They just managed to rendezvous with the small freighter on the edge of the system when the Covenant ship exploded. Cortana's voice came over the Chief's helmet speakers.

"Well done. How did you manage to destroy the ship?"

"Blade set the self-destruct sequence and encrypted it, with the help of a renegade Elite," one of the captured Marines replied, a trace of respect in his voice.

"A renegade Elite who's just died." Laura's voice began to crack, and her defiant tone was gone. "He sacrificed himself to give us the chance to escape."

Everyone in the room bowed their heads. Not one person said anything like "Good riddance" because they all knew they owed him their lives. Even Cortana paused a moment in silence, before she asked another question.

"What kind of encryption did you use?"

"A traditional one, a riddle I took from Lord of the Rings. One that I knew they'd never be able to guess." Taking a deep breath she recited:

'Alive without breath,

As cold as death.

Never thirsting, ever drinking,

Clad in mail never clinking.

Drowns on dry land, thinks an island

Is a mountain. Thinks a fountain

Is a puff of air.'

"Can you guess the answer?"

"No. I cannot think of anything that matches your description."

"It's a fish, Cortana. It's only a fish." Just as she said that, the pain she'd been fighting during the escape began to take hold; Laura staggered for a bit, and fell into the arms of the Master Chief, who had reached out to catch her as she fell. _What a coincidence, that I fall dead in the arms of the man I love, _she thought just before she passed out.

The Master Chief laid her gently on the deck of the dropship, and linked in to her biomonitors: there was severe internal injuries and bleeding, and she had slipped into unconsciousness, if not into a coma. _If she doesn't make it, this will all have been for nothing, _he thought. He opened a private channel with Cortana.

"How long does she have? How long before we reach Earth?"

"Seeing as the Covenant probably already know the location of Earth, I can make only one random jump before we head to Earth, shortening the travel time to twelve hours. Unfortunately, according to Laura's vital signs, she may only last for another fifteen hours without proper treatment."

"What about the Cole protocol?" There was surprise in the Chief's voice.

"Chief, think about it: if the Covenant had a spy waiting to capture Laura in the first place, they probably already know where we are. Plus, I seriously doubt that they're just going to discard our location so easily. The Cole protocol is no longer valid, really."

"Just get us to Earth, as quickly as possible. Do what you need to, just get us there." Cortana noticed the subtle ache lacing his tone, and noticed how he gently removed the helmet and felt for a pulse. _So, there is feeling there. I should inform Lorian, but not yet. Laura's survival is still in doubt._

Twelve hours later, the freighter reached Earth space and Cortana relayed the proper responses so the ship could land on Earth, and the request for methane units to be sent to the pad: the UNSC had many of these units, since the Spartans had brought back a number of Grunt prisoners—and several of their methane bladders and rations, which the UNSC had copied to keep the prisoners alive—after capturing the warship _Holy Retribution_. She also relayed the need for an emergency medical team to meet the shuttle at the landing pad. As the final landing approached, she noticed the Master Chief tensing perceptibly.

"I'm sure she'll be fine, Chief. She's been through hell before."

"That's not the only thing I'm worried about."

The hatch opened, and the escaped prisoners filed out. Two of them stopped beside a gurney, exchanging words with a gray-haired doctor.

She paled visibly and ran into the ship with the rest of the team close behind.

"How long has she been unconscious?"

"About twelve hours, I think. We came as quickly as we could."

He assisted Dr. Gedeon in lifting her unconscious daughter onto the gurney, following her out with Yipin the Grunt at his side. It felt odd walking next to a Grunt and not trying to kill him for once. When he noticed his fellow Spartans pointing weapons at the diminutive alien, he motioned them to stand down and escorted the little guy to General West, who happened to be standing nearby.

"Sir, this one helped us get off the ship in one piece, as did the dead Elite onboard the freighter. They were imprisoned as heretics."

"Then I'll see to it they're both properly taken care of." West lowered his voice. "I think you have a lot of explaining to do, Chief." As he walked away, John saw his fellow Spartans heading toward him. Fred was the first to open his mouth.

"You could have at least dragged us along! What were you thinking, going off by yourself?" As angry as he sounded, John knew he was also concerned; his going off alone like that was out of character.

"I didn't want you to get in trouble along with me. Ackerson ordered me to follow her and avoid contact, and I let the Covenant capture Laura because I listened to the bastard when he said she was a traitor. I had to go alone, because I made the mistake."

"Was it just because of that?" Linda's quiet voice unnerved him. _How much does she know?_

"Trust me, it was for the best. Besides, it worked didn't it?"

"It would've worked better if we'd been with you," Will pointed out. To that, John had no answer, at least none he felt like telling.

****March 24, 2553 1922 hours****

****Adams Medical Facility****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

She wasn't sure how much time had passed, but when she woke up she was in a hospital bed; the last thing she remembered was collapsing in the Covenant dropship. Slitting her eyes (she was getting pretty good at feigning sleep), Laura discerned three armored giants standing around the door, as well as her cellmates from the Covenant ship. Someone touched her head lightly, and she recognized her mother's voice.

"She must still be unconscious, but I can't imagine why. According to these readouts, she came out of the coma hours ago."

"Maybe she's just asleep, Dr. Gedeon," one of the soldiers by the door pointed out. "If that's the case, I'd hate to wake her up."

"Or perhaps she's awake and just eavesdropping," Fred's voice was its usual acerbic tone, but Laura noticed a subtle change in pitch and tone which suggested the beginnings of a grudging respect. Dr. Gedeon, hearing the Spartan's words, glanced back at her face in time to see one eyebrow arc in query, a thing that Laura knew drove her up a wall.

"Laura Elizabeth!"

"Good morning to you too, Mom. Or is it afternoon?" Laura murmured as she tried to sit up. Pain lanced through her body as she tried to push herself into a sitting position.

"It's actually late evening. How are you feeling?"

"It hurts a bit, which means it probably hurts a lot. How long was I out of it?"

"According to the Master Chief, you were unconscious for about 12 hours before they brought you in. You've been comatose for about a week." Dr. Gedeon sounded tired.

"Oh, hell, that's not good. It'll take me at least that long to get caught up on all my research and stuff." She finally took a good look at her mother, and her eyes widened in concern: she noticed the dark circles under her mother's blue eyes, which looked extremely fatigued. "You haven't been resting, have you?"

"Yes, I have been, but last night one of Colonel Ackerson's men decided to pay you a visit. We've been keeping watch just in case someone else tried something."

"Damn him!" Laura muttered under her breath, but everyone in the room heard: she had a low-pitched voice that carried even when it was soft. "One of these days I'll see he gets his comeuppance, I guarantee it." Looking around the room, she noticed again that there were only three Spartans. _One's missing, but which one?_ She knew Fred was there, but couldn't tell the other two apart. Fortunately, one spoke up: it was Linda, by the voice.

"What did the Covenant bastards do to you, Laura?"

"Tried to torture information out of me with electric spears. It wasn't pretty, but I didn't give anything away. You would've been proud of me if you'd been there." Suddenly her eyes widened again. "Where's Yipin, the little Grunt?"

"In a prison cell, but he's being well-treated, by General West's orders," one of the soldiers mentioned.

"Guess I owe him one for that; remind me to bake some pumpkin bread for him as soon as I get out of here. I still need to thank the little guy, too. I'll figure out how eventually." Laura rolled over to try and rest, and gasped a little as fresh pain shot through her. Dr. Gedeon immediately checked a readout.

"The painkillers are wearing off. I'll get some more for you."

"No you will not. I'll get hooked on those things before you know it and then we'll be in a world of trouble. I'm not taking any of them, I can handle the pain." She gritted her teeth and rolled onto her back like she'd been before. Dr. Gedeon motioned for the others to leave, but as they left, Laura asked Linda—"the closest thing to a military friend she had--to stay for a while. Linda came near the bed.

"Any chance you could take that off? I feel a bit uncomfortable with talking to faceless people." She tried to smile as she said it, but the pain caused a grimace instead. Linda didn't remove her helmet, but she did slide the faceplate up so Laura could see her face.

"Linda, who's missing? I only count three Spartans: you, Fred--who I see still hates my guts--and either Will or the Chief. Who's gone?"

"The Chief said he had some things to take care of. We volunteered to keep an eye on you. And just for the record, Fred doesn't hate you, he's just jealous."

"Why on Earth would he be jealous of me? True, I'm a decent hand with combat knives, but that's about it."

"He envies the way you can stand up to people, your skills in close combat, and I think he's jealous of the Chief's interest in you."

"The Chief could care less about me," Laura murmured as she started to fall asleep. _Why do I feel so tired? Probably blood loss. _"I'm just another soldier to him, just a weapon. He probably wouldn't look twice at me if I wasn't a Spartan." With that thought hanging in the air, she fell asleep. Just before she drifted off, she thought she heard Linda speaking.

"No, to him you're more than a soldier."

31. Chapter 30: A Growing Affliction?

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Thirty: A Growing Affliction?

****March 24, 2553 1936 hours****

****Adams Medical Facility****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

"_No, to him you're more than a soldier."_

That comment, the last thing Laura heard before she slept, sparked a new dream, one she remembered when she woke up. As she thought about it, she realized it was actually another ancient

memory.

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Alaya and Marin had been invited to attend a celebration by Alaya's friend Naryse, and her sister Eilinn. Alaya of course had planned on attending, but was quite surprised that Marin eagerly decided to join her, and even more surprised to see her younger brother dressed up.

"Well, Marin, who are we trying to impress this time?"

"No one you need worry about," Marin replied gruffly. Alaya smiled, guessing that young Eilinn was the cause. She was quite attractive, actually, with raven black hair and sparkling green eyes. Naryse was just as gorgeous, with blood red hair and emerald eyes. She also had an accurate eye and a singular wit, and more than once had brought peals of laughter from Alaya, who usually was stern and solemn.

Arriving at Naryse's home, Alaya knocked twice; Eilinn opened the door and blushed when she saw Marin. _Aha, I was right,_ Alaya thought as she greeted the young girl in front of her.

"Alaya? Is that you crossing my threshold?" Naryse called from inside.

"It is indeed, dear friend," Alaya replied, her voice taking on its seldom-heard lilting melody. Naryse walked into the entrance, stopping short when she saw what Alaya was wearing.

"Oh, no, Alaya! You can't seriously be thinking of wearing that!"

"It's the best I own, Naryse, outside of my festival costume," Alaya replied, sounding slightly defensive as she indicated the plain cloth suit she wore. "I have nothing else, besides, it's practical."

"Nonsense!" Naryse exclaimed. "You'll never impress the men looking like that! Come with me, I have just the thing." She dragged Alaya through the residence to her bedroom, nearly running over her other guest. Alaya noticed him just before she was dragged through another door. _Captain Corin! Why is he here?_

Corin watched as Naryse literally dragged Alaya through her home, smiling at the humor of the situation. _This may turn out to be a more interesting evening than I had anticipated._ He resumed his seat as Marin walked through the doorway.

"Captain, I was unaware you were invited as well," Marin spoke quietly, glancing behind him as if looking for something.

"Naryse invited me along, and informed me that you would be attending as well. I thought that we could pass the time just as easily amongst these civilians."

"Perhaps, Corin, I attended for other reasons, as did you," Marin smiled knowingly; he and Corin were the best of friends and had been since training. "Did you come in hope of seeing my sister?"

"Did you come to see someone else?" Corin countered, a smile on his face that mirrored the one on Marin's. At that moment, they were distracted by a high-pitched, fearful voice coming from Naryse's room.

"No, definitely no! Naryse, you must be joking! This outfit can barely be called a dress—there's almost no fabric to it! I refuse to wear it! Absolutely not!" Alaya was clearly worried about the clothes Naryse had given her.

"Believe me, it looks better on than off, Alaya," Naryse's voice came through calm and soft. "Once you put it on, you'll see it covers everything while flattering your figure. Trust me, or else I'll call Marin in and ask him to help me put it on you." Her voice was lighthearted, but there was a definite threat to her words.

"It seems I have no choice. Very well," Alaya resignedly replied.

A few moments later, Naryse emerged from her room, followed by a chagrined Alaya. Corin could only gape in astonishment at the change: somehow her friend had transformed her from a plain, nearly-invisible scientist into a stunning model of womanly perfection. Her plain suit had been replaced by a royal blue dress, which fit her torso snugly and flowed out beneath her waist. Trimmed in silver at the hem, with little seams of silver thread at the bodice, it suited the young scientist well, and made her look more feminine. A necklace of silver and crystal hung around her throat, and Naryse had arranged her hair into a simple style which framed her face. A few moments later, moments that seemed to stretch into eternity, Corin noticed the reason for Alaya's discomfort. The dress only reached to just above her knees, while the neckline scooped down almost to her chest. It was clearly not what she was used to, but the style and color fit her well.

"Doesn't she look lovely, Captain?" Naryse purred. In that instant, Corin realized why he'd been invited: Naryse was trying to make a match between her friend and him. _Absurd! As if she would even look in my direction. She is a scientist, and everyone knows how insufferably arrogant they are._ The thoughts rang hollow once he remembered her father had been a soldier, and that Alaya had wanted to be a soldier, even more so when he remembered his visit to her quarters a few weeks previously.

"Naryse, you actually made her look human, I'm impressed," Marin joked.

"Marin!" Alaya blurted out suddenly, blushing furiously and looking more lovely (in Corin's eyes) with the color in her face. "You're not helping. I look ridiculous!"

"I think you look halfway decent," Corin heard himself saying. _She does, too. She looks gorgeous._

"As if I should trust a soldier's opinion! Everyone knows the only thing a soldier finds attractive is the battlefield," she replied coolly, trying to hide the sudden panic she felt. _He thinks me attractive! What next?_

Once the other guests arrived, Alaya began to feel slightly more at

ease, trying to blend in to the background amongst the other people. It had always been easy for her to disappear, sometimes all she had to do was stand with people and they looked around her and through her. Standing amongst people now, she watched as her brother asked Eilinn to dance with him; she accepted shyly, as was her way, and the two of them began to dance smoothly together. _Ah, it seems I was right after all,_ she thought once more as she saw the way Marin looked at his partner. _Perhaps they will wed before it's too late._ Hearing footsteps behind her, she spoke quietly, her eyes fixed on Marin and Eilinn.

"They make a lovely couple, don't they, Naryse? I hope they wed soon, they deserve to be happy."

"Indeed, they do." The voice behind her was not Naryse's, and Alaya whirled around in surprise to find Corin standing behind her. He smiled lightly, but there was something else in his eyes that startled her, something she couldn't identify.

"Forgive me if I startled you. I was just wondering if you were interested in a dance later."

"My apologies, Captain, but I do not dance well, if indeed I dance at all."

"Don't play the fool with me, Alaya. I've seen you in the festivals, you move well." Alaya was flattered that he'd watched her, and surprised at his next words. "Alaya, I would consider myself honored to be your partner for the next dance."

"Very well, Captain. You may have the next dance with me." Right as she said this, a new dance tune twinkled out, and Corin offered her his hand. Somehow, Alaya took it and danced beside him. The way he held her indicated he knew something about the dances himself.

"I am surprised, Captain. Few military men know how to dance."

"My father taught me when I entered the age of courtship. He is most disappointed that I have no family yet."

"Many women would be more than happy to wed a military captain with your prestige," Alaya murmured, conscious of his arm around her waist, flushing when she realized she had spoken aloud.

"So I have noticed," Corin replied dryly, "but I have yet to find one who catches my interest."

"For myself, I think Naryse would suit you very well. Not only is she beautiful, but she is wise to the ways of the world."

"Perhaps," Corin replied, knowing full well how much both of them were lying. Alaya was purposely trying to distance herself for reasons he did not fully understand.

When the dance ended, Alaya politely excused herself and slipped out into the cool night air. Each of the HALO stations had been modeled after a planet capable of sustaining life, and the place where Alaya now walked was one of the pleasanter areas of the ringworld. She strolled about for a little while until she came to a small stream. Sitting down carefully, so as not to ruin the dress her friend had

given her, Alaya listened to the chatter of the stream and the sounds of birds in the trees. She wasn't sure how long she had sat there when she heard a noise behind her. Turning around brought her to face a soldier in Marin's platoon, one who had consistently made her uneasy. Remembering how the Council had offered her an escort for social functions, she wished now that she had accepted their offer: Alaya had her doubts about whether or not this man would leave her alone.

"Well, I am surprised. I never thought Marin would ever let his lover go off alone. Doesn't he ever worry that you will betray him?" the soldier sneered.

"My brother knows I will never betray him, and he trusts me enough to let me do as I see fit," Alaya replied as she slowly got to her feet.

"When are the two of you going to stop playing your little game? Everyone knows General Petrarch only had one child: Marin."

"Just because everyone knows it doesn't mean it is true. Go into the records and you will find two children were born to General Petrarch. I am the elder of the two, and have looked out for Marin ever since our father died." She didn't like the way the man was looking at her, and her discomfort must have been plainer than she thought.

"That dress must be very uncomfortable. Perhaps you should take it off?" the man muttered lecherously.

"I'll not be removing it just yet, and never in your presence," Alaya declared, her words bolder than she felt.

"Oh no? I hardly doubt a maiden _scientist_ would be able to stop me. Indeed, I daresay you'd be glad if I decide to assist you in its removal," the man sneered before he lunged. Alaya dodged, saw him dive headfirst into the stream, and bolted toward Naryse's home. She had almost made it when he caught her arm and yanked her back towards him, tearing at the dress she wore. Reverting to what her father had taught her, Alaya lashed out with her wrist, breaking his nose and sending him staggering backwards. She twisted away and assumed a fighting stance: her fear was rapidly giving way to anger. The soldier stopped staggering and stood still.

"You think you're too good for me?"

"When you behave like that, I know I am too good for you," Alaya rasped through clenched teeth. "Besides, my heart belongs to another, one who is more worthy of my heart and deserves better than my love." She had no real idea why she said this, but it seemed to make her attacker angry. He charged forward, and Alaya stood her ground.

Corin waited silently in the shadows of Naryse's home, watching for some glimpse of Alaya. He hadn't seen her since they'd parted after their dance, and it worried him a little. Spotting Naryse, he approached her and saw the worried look on her face.

"Naryse, where is Alaya? I have not seen her for some time."

"Captain, I don't know. She left to take a breath of air after your dance, and I haven't seen her since. No one knows where she couldâ€" " Naryse happened to look up and out of the window; her expression changed to cold fear. "Oh no! Heaven help her!"

Corin followed her gaze and saw one of his own men begin to charge Alaya; she stood her ground until the last minute, and then sidestepped and landed a blow on his neck. The man shook it off, and charged again. Even though he knew Alaya could protect herself, Corin felt an overwhelming urge to act, to protect her. He stepped outside angrily, followed by Marin, who had noticed Corin's face in passing. They were just in time: Alaya had stumbled, and her attacker was almost on top of her. Corin landed a fierce punch to his face; as the man staggered back, he and Marin positioned themselves in front of Alaya.

"What do you think you are doing, soldier?" Corin thundered.

"What difference is it to you, _sir_?" the man sneered back. "Has that little harlot wrapped you around her finger as well?"

Marin stepped forward and nailed the man across the face, hard. Blood flowed from an extremely broken nose and several cuts that Alaya had managed to inflict. Even Corin could tell he was angry at the insult--although to be fair, it took all of his self-control to keep from killing the man himself. When Marin spoke, his tones were laced with barely restrained anger and violence.

"You dare insult my sister, who saved your miserable hide twice over? If she hadn't done so, you wouldn't be here now, and you repay her like this? You are no soldier, you are a disgrace." He drew back his hand to deliver another blow, but the man bolted off into the shadows.

Alaya, meanwhile, was sitting off by herself, trying to regain control over her emotions. When Naryse and Eilinn approached, she began to cry, her tears quiet enough that Corin barely heard them.

"Oh, Alaya, I'm so sorry," Naryse was saying. "I've brought this on your head, you were right."

"I'm sorry about the dress, Naryse. It wasn't mine, and now it's ruined."

"Forget the dress, dear friend. Come, I will take you home." The women looked up as Corin approached.

"Madam Naryse, I am disgusted that one of my own men would attack one of your guests. Is there any way I could offer compensation?" His words came out awkwardly, but Naryse understood: he was attempting to make amends for the man's actions.

"I daresay there's little that can be done, but I am sure you will handle the necessaryâ€¦formalities." Her tone was clear; Naryse expected some justice for her friend's sake.

"I will see to it myself, Madam. However, it would ease my own mind if you would allow me to see Alaya safely home. There is no need for further trouble tonight." _And I would prefer to be in her company,

if only for a little while._ He swore he saw a sly smile that formed on the other woman's face behind her worried look.

"Of course, Captain. I leave Alaya to your care." Naryse rose and went inside to inform the other guests that there was nothing more to fear. Corin held out his hand and helped the young scientist to her feet, conscious of the fact that she was still trembling.

"Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

"Only my pride, Captain, nothing else. I'm just a little shaken at the moment," she replied with an effort. "I'm fit enough to travel by myself."

"And if he should come back and try again? Forgive me, madam, but I would feel more comfortable traveling with you, should he make another attempt." Alaya decided not to argue the point, and secretly was glad for the escort, but refused to admit it; she had her pride, after all, or what was left of it after her ordeal. The two walked on for some time before Alaya realized they were not nearing her quarters. Her mind flashed back to her earlier encounter, and she felt the fear returning. Corin noticed her trembling and placed a comforting hand on her arm, noting that she tensed but didn't pull away.

"Alaya, there is nothing to fear," he murmured in a low, soothing voice. Alaya was only slightly reassured, though.

"Where are we going?"

Corin's face quickly became grim. "One of my men assaulted you, and made the mistake of doing so in front of both myself and your brother. I'm not about to let him get off so lightly; the military tribunal will see justice done." _If not, I will myself_.

Some time later, they left the tribunal and continued towards Alaya's quarters. The tribunal had been shocked by Corin's story, especially since the intended victim was one of their leading experts on the Flood, and promised to look into the matter. Alaya was glad that justice would be served, but the look in Corin's eyes had frightened her. _I've never seen him so furious before. Was it because one of his soldiers acted this way, or was it because of me?_ Her thoughts were scattered and confused by the time she reached her door.

"Thank you, Captain. I should be fine from here."

"It was no trouble, Alaya. However, I am not comfortable with leaving you alone."

"There is no one in there, I locked my door before I left it last, and will lock it again after I enter," she smiled slightly, touched by his concern.

"Very well then. Good night, Alaya." He raised her hand to his lips in farewell, a gentlemanly gesture that sent her heart singing, though she maintained composure.

"Good night, Captain."

As she entered and closed the door, making sure to lock it securely,

Alaya sank down into a chair and closed her eyes. _This has been one of the worst nights I've ever endured. So why am I so happy right now?_

On the other side of her door, as he turned away to continue his own journeys, Corin recalled a private conversation with one of the members of the military tribunal.

"I could see what would drive a man to act in this way. She is a taking little thing, for a scientist."

"Perhaps, but lovely or no, there is no right for a man to accost her the way he did, not even if he is a soldier. Her brother said the same, and saw what I saw if you should wish to question him."

"Perhaps we shall, at that. Although I wonder at why she didn't come herself."

"I offered to provide escort, in case he returned again. And if he had I would have ensured he would regret it, laws or no laws."

"Strong words, Captain, too strong for simple justice. Has the pretty scientist caught your eye?"

"Not just my eye, and it appears to be the same with her, though she is too honorable to say it."

"If she is Petrarch's daughter, I can understand that. Good luck, Captain, and mayhap you'll catch her yet."

Corin walked to his quarters, wishing he were somewhere else.

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March 24, 2553 2312 hours

Laura sat up in her bed, ignoring the pain as she held her head in her hands; she was actually scared, which no one would have thought possible. _What's happening to me? What's going on?_ It was becoming harder to separate the memories from the reality; she felt like Alaya was beginning to take control of her life, and take possession of her body. _I have to learn to fight it_, she decided. _I have to learn to control the memories, before I lose control of myself._ She doubted that she'd lose her mind, but where this thing was concerned, no one knew.

32. Chapter 31 New Education

Sorry guys, this one's a little lengthy! Blade decides to teach the Covenant POWs about Earth, can she do it? Enjoy! Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Thirty-One: New Education

March 28, 2553 0900 hours

****Wilkerson Prison Facility****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Having a long ways to go before full recovery from her prison ordeal, and wanting to keep from dwelling on Alaya's memories, Laura decided to kill time and try teaching the Covenant prisoners English. After consulting with General West, she was brought to a meeting area in a wheelchair, and the POW's were led in. Yipin, the little Grunt who had helped her escape the Covenant cruiser when she was captured, gave a small bark of delight and ran up to her; actually, with the breathing mask and armor, the little guy was waddling more so than running.

"Hello, Yipin. It's good to see you again." Even though she knew the little Grunt didn't understand her words, the tone of her voice said the message just as clearly; by the excited barks coming from Yipin, Laura knew her message had been understood. The rest of the prisoners, which consisted of several Elites, a few Grunts besides Yipin, and a Prophet, stayed back and watched warily. She recognized the Prophet as being the one they'd nabbed on the Retribution, and smirked at the ugly look to cross his already-ugly face. When Laura approached them, wheeling herself over, an Elite slapped her across the face. The soldiers in the room raised their weapons; Laura saw them taking aim at the prisoners and ordered them to stand down.

"Lower those weapons, people. We're not going to get anywhere by shooting at each other." The soldiers reluctantly complied, but kept their fingers close to the trigger in case one of the aliens tried something. Laura shook her head to clear the ringing from her ears, wheeling herself away from the Prophet and the Elites. Noticing Yipin's face, what little she could see beneath the breathing mask, she swore she could see concern in the little Grunt's eyes.

"I'm all right. But you won't be for long if we don't see to your immediate needs," she said as she motioned one of the Marines over. He kept his finger on the trigger, looking warily at the Covenant.

"We do have methane available for the Grunts?" The Marine's jaw dropped in surprise, thinking that Blade would be the last person concerned about the POWs well-being, but he managed a response.

"Uh, no ma'am, not in the immediate area. I can have someone bring some here in about ten minutes or so." Laura scowled, privately thinking that someone should have thought of this sooner.

"I guess it'll have to do. Bring it in here as soon as possible-we may need it at any point in time. Who knows how much methane they have left in their tanks?" The soldier nodded and left.

Laura turned back to her 'students' and spoke, knowing that the Elites, and possibly the Prophet, were equipped with translators that could understand human speech. "By now you've realized that we don't intend to do you any harm, especially since you've been well-treated during your captivity. I thought it would be a good idea for you to learn a bit more about Earth, to pass the time if nothing else.

Besides, as one of our wise men once said, it's wise to study the ways of one's adversary." She wheeled herself around to retrieve a book from the rolling shelves she'd had brought earlier. Flipping through the pages, she stopped at a poem written by Emily Dickinson, _Success is Counted Sweetest_:

'_Success is counted sweetest,_
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.
Not one of all the purple host
Who took the flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory
As he defeated-dying-
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!'

Putting down the book, she looked at the POW's, her eyes alight with something they recognized as zeal, but out of place on a human countenance. She spoke quietly to them.

"Emily Dickinson was considered an odd person, a recluse, someone who never left the home she lived in. No one truly understands her even now, when she's been dead for over a thousand years. But she still survives through her poetry, which is easy to understand if you look hard enough." She rolled herself over there again, pleasantly surprised when none of them hit her. "Good, we're making progress. Shall we begin the lessons?"

Several hours later, Laura headed back to her hospital bed, tired but happy; they were fast learners, and in one day she had managed to teach them the entire English alphabet. Their translators were a big help, but they were surprised to learn that there were over a thousand different languages on Earth. "I don't even know all of them, but I know of them," she'd said. "I'm teaching you English because that one is the most common, and pretty much everyone on Earth speaks it as a standard language." Even Yipin was learning the words: he'd actually tried to say her name, but didn't get it out completely. Laura smiled at the attempt, finding Loa to be an amusing nickname. The Prophet seemed to learn the fastest, and Laura decided to give him a bit of a challenge. _Since he appears to be able to read, let's give him something interesting to think about._ When she was wheeled into the 'schoolroom' the next day, she noticed the Prophet had left the usual group of Elites and was perusing the bookshelves, his antigravity belt causing him to bob up and down and bringing a faint smile to her lips.

"I see you've taken an interest in human literature," Laura's words caught the Prophet by surprise.

"I am merely bored with sitting each day." The words seemed uneasy in his mouth, but they were spoken almost perfectly--and haughtily, she noticed.

"Perhaps I can find something that will interest you," Laura said as she perused a datapad. Finding what she wanted, she handed the pad to her 'student'. "I believe you'll find these quite interesting. However, you will only be able to read what has been uploaded on the datapad--if you try to use it to access anything else, it will shut down."

"What are these?"

"Files on the various religions among humanity. Seeing as you yourself are a religious leader, I figured this would provide some unique insight on what you consider vermin." Her dark eyes held the Prophet's for a long while, as she pulled a silver-filigree cross set with turquoise from under her shirt. "My religion has this as its symbol. Others have different symbols and icons, but it gives their followers meaning. As I said, you may find it interesting."

Allowing the Prophet to peruse the data at his own pace, Laura began to teach the Elites and Grunts; while she had the Elites reading about Earth history, she tried to help the Grunts along with learning English. A warbling laugh from one of the Elites caused her to look up, frowning.

"You waste time. Grunts too foolish to learn." The Elite chortled again.

"No one is too foolish to learn, some just need to learn at their own speed. Perhaps you consider them fools because you never tried to teach them yourself. Besides, if they truly are too foolish to learn, how did you teach them to fight?" Her arguments were sound and her voice was calm, stopping the Elite mid-warble. A tugging on her sleeve caused her to look down; Yipin was holding a thin book in his claws.

"Loa, ead lease?" Laura had learned enough of the Grunt's attempts at English to understand his request: _Laura, read please?_ She smiled down at the little Grunt.

"Of course I'll read to you, Yipin. Why don't you bring all of your kin, so I can read to them too?" As Yipin scampered off, Laura smiled to herself. _Yipin is quite a fast learner, but he needs more help with his speech._ When the Grunts gathered around her in a semi-circle, the Elites and the Prophet watched as Laura read _Pinocchio_ to the little aliens in a clear voice. When she finished, she explained the story as well as she could, her tone kindly and patient. The Prophet noticed a spark of previously unperceived intelligence kindling in the Grunts' eyes, especially in the one called Yipin; he noted that Yipin always tried his best to translate Laura's words to his fellow Grunts, which often helped the others understand. What surprised him most was the strange human's patience and kindly ways; he'd seen holographic records of this same human slay other Covenant soldiers seemingly without remorse.

Turning back to the datapad she'd given him, the Prophet continued to peruse through the religions and cultures of humanity. _I had no idea there were so many! These humans are truly unusual, for vermin._ He noted stories of religious crusades, human sacrifices for the blessings of violent gods, terrorist acts by religious fanatics, the rise and fall of empires where religion had been central, religions of ancient human tribes long extinct, and religions that still existed in the present. Making sure the camera hidden in his robes was recording everything, in order to send a secret message to his brethren when he had the opportunity, the Prophet continued to read about Earth cultures, eyes widening with each new discovery. By the time the human clad in white came to take Laura away, the Prophet was truly puzzled. He floated toward Laura and the white human, uncaring that the other human was afraid of him.

"Why did you have me read this?"

"Because I thought it would help you understand that our cultures and governments are not so different. Perhaps it was the wrong thing to do, but it felt right." She looked him in the eye, her dark eyes holding his own with an intense gaze. "I've heard it said that understanding is a three-edged sword: your side, my side, and the truth. Yet if both sides believe their point of view is the truth, what is the real truth? Who will see it if it ever is revealed?" With that, she motioned to the other human. "Nurse, I'm tired."

"Yes, ma'am. It's high time you went back to rest. At this rate you'll never get any better, you'll only get worse."

"You are ill?" one of the Elites asked, his warbling words still understandable. The other POW's turned to listen.

"Ill, no. In pain, yes. I was tortured by Brutes while a prisoner on a Covenant ship." Laura grimaced at the looks of disgust and outrage on the faces of her Elite pupils. "Yipin could probably tell the full tale, since he came from that very ship." Her face paled as a fresh wave of pain hit, and the nurse wheeled her out of the room.

The next day being Sunday, the Covenant prisoners were surprised when Laura wasn't in the room for their lessons; what they saw was a strange human male with the human female in white that Laura had called Nurse.

"She wasn't in her room, and her wheelchair was gone. I have no idea where she could be." Nurse seemed a bit more worried than when the Prophet had last seen her.

"Have you asked her mother? She may have some insights as to where our truant patient might have gone." The male's voice, though it sounded amused, gave off a sense of command and military presence.

"I've already asked. Dr. Gedeon has no clue, Laura being an enigma on a regular basis." Any further speech was interrupted by the arrival of a third human with a datapad, this one also a female. This human was taller than the other two, with dark, intense green eyes and short red hair, almost the color of the humans' blood.

"Sir, was Laura cleared to leave the hospital earlier?" The newcomer's voice was soft, but hinted at deadly strength and quiet

confidence.

"No, why?"

"I think you'd better see this." The red-haired female handed him the pad, and the Prophet noticed the man's eyes widen.

"What is going on, where is our teacher?" the Prophet asked as he floated over, his voice containing a touch of concern, as well as being less haughty than on previous days. The green-eyed female, at a nod from the male, went to a viewscreen and connected the datapad to it, the result providing a picture. Laura was seated in her wheelchair in a wide hall, ornately decorated and carved. Prominently displayed on one wall over an altar was a cross, with a figure of a human male nailed to it; the Prophet remembered from his reading that some human religions spoke of a savior, a son of a god who allowed himself to be killed to save the souls of the humans. The Prophet found it difficult to understand how a god would willingly sacrifice himself for vermin, though Laura had tried to explain it once: the god of the humans was merciful and wise, as well as swift to righteous anger. Laura held a thick book in her hands, and was singing in praise. There was a light in her eyes that took them by surprise, giving her a look of wisdom and life that they'd not seen while she was teaching them the ways of Earth.

"Is this a live feed?" the man asked. The tall woman nodded.

"Will followed her to the building. According to a sign out front, it's Saint Joseph Catholic Church." For some odd reason, the man found this amusing.

"Of all the places we'd thought Laura could be, a church wasn't even on the list. How long has she been there?"

"About an hour, I think." Looking at the screen, everyone in the room noticed the hall emptying out. Laura stopped and exchanged a few pleasantries with some of the other humans, then continued wheeling herself away.

The human male turned off the viewscreen and looked at the two females. "Well, you can call Dr. Gedeon and tell her Laura went to church on us, and that she's on her way back." The female in white left, but the other stayed behind.

Almost at that exact moment, Laura wheeled into the room, saw the group and the expressions on their faces, and stopped dead with an embarrassed look on her face.

"I had no idea you were a religious person, Laura," the man commented.

"Something my parents tried to instill in me early on, General West." She shot a pointed glance at the datapad in the man's hand. "I had a feeling it was too easy to slip out. Who followed me?"

"One of the Spartans." The red-haired female said nothing, but a faint smile appeared on her face, a smile that was almost invisible. Laura noticed it and shook her head, a few strands of dark hair falling in front of her eyes.

"Figures. Well, since everybody's here, I guess we'll start class."

Laura spent the better part of the afternoon working with the Covenant; the Prophet noticed that the human she'd called General West remained to observe, while the other female left. When one of the Elites asked about the hall she'd been in, she explained that that was her church, her place of worship for her religion. At this point the Prophet jumped in to assist with the discussion, his own newly-acquired knowledge making it simpler for the Elites to understand. Laura decided it was time for the Elites to start learning about human religions, and gave them appropriate reading materials while she worked with the Grunts on English. She was pleased to see that they were picking up the language fairly well, and Yipin positively made her day when he finally said 'Laura' instead of 'Loa' when he asked her to read to them. She was tired and exhausted, but happy, until the door opened.

The human that entered was different from the others the POW's had seen. There was a cold look in his eyes, and his face looked ugly from his scowl. He walked toward Laura, who sat still in her wheelchair, seemingly unafraid of this ugly stranger.

"So, you're wasting valuable time and resources consorting with the enemy, Blade?" His voice was laced with venomous hatred, and his words confused the Covenant--why did he call her Blade?

"I wouldn't exactly call it a waste, Ackerson. Teaching them a little about Earth isn't going to hurt. Besides, it may help to end the war in the long run--isn't that worth any expenditure of time and resources?" She watched coolly as his face reddened in anger.

"You have no right to talk to me about what's worth what. I know how much the end of the war would be worth."

"Then why don't you get back out to the frontlines and help to end it? Or do you not care whether Earth falls or not? What insidious agenda keeps you here, when you could be out there saving lives? I can tell you right now, your reputation and ambitions won't matter a whit when you're dead." Laura's voice remained calm, but her hands were clenched in cold fury.

"Careful, Blade," the ugly human sneered, obviously trying to control his anger. "No need to make any more mistakes. Of course, I suppose it would be easy for a mistake to make mistakes." The words hung in the room, leaving everyone shocked except Laura, whose face paled. Yipin was the first of them to take action: he ran up and started shouting at the human called Ackerson. The little Grunt didn't quite understand all of the ugly human's words, but he perceived that the ugly one was insulting his teacher, and that bothered him quite a bit.

"Leave Laura alone. She my friend!" His English was still not very good, but his words couldn't have been plainer. Ackerson's face paled, and he raised his foot in preparation to kick the little Grunt.

Laura guessed what was coming, but there was no time to call out a warning. She did the only thing she could think of to do: bracing herself for the pain she knew would be coming, she threw herself out

of her wheelchair and took Ackerson's kick in her side, almost exactly where the Brute staff had stabbed her. She landed hard on her other side, crying out from the intensity of the pain; Yipin remembered hearing a similar sound on his old ship, but this one did not sound nearly as painful. West stood up in shock, most of the Elites circled the Prophet while three stood in front of Laura, and the Grunts (except Yipin) scattered in confusion. The soldiers lining the walls brought their rifles up, waiting for an order of some sort, while two guards moved toward the door in case they needed to go for backup.

"Ackerson, what the hell do you think you're doing?" West bellowed from the corner. Ackerson spun around with a fearful look in his eyes--he hadn't expected the general to be there. He looked from the general, to the Covenant, to Laura lying on the floor, holding her sides in pain. Slowly, after about five minutes, she braced herself against the wall and stood up, uncaring of the pain as she took slow, deliberate steps towards the man who'd kicked her. The Covenant noticed her tall, upright figure and saw a nobility in her stature; the Prophet himself realized that she and the other human female, the one with red hair and green eyes, were of the same caste, as near as he could perceive it.

"By all rights, I should be allowed to kill you right here, Colonel or no. But so help me if you ever attack one of my students ever again, I will kill you and enjoy it, even if I have to force the pleasure out."

"Is that a threat, Blade? I could have you court-martialed for this!"

"Fine, do so, by all means. But your case would fail, since you would first have to prove my existence, which is something ONI has denied for years, and since we have a number of witnesses against you." She gestured to the soldiers around the room, the Covenant, and West. "I suggest you leave and not come back." Ackerson stood there angrily for several seconds trying to come up with a sharp retort, but he took one look at her face and decided to leave. When he finally did, Laura started to lose her balance from the pain; two of her Elite students came up beside her and helped her back to her wheelchair before she fell.

"Shall I get a doctor, Laura?" West asked quietly after taking one look at her face.

"As much as I hate to bother one of them, you probably should. It's really hurting. I know I probably shouldn't have done what I did, but it was the right thing to do; I didn't think I had another choice." West put one hand on her shoulder.

"Ackerson was out of line even coming down here. This has gone far enough, in fact it's gone too far. I'll report this to the Security Council; they need to know what he's trying to do. Laura, with your permission I'd like to tell them everything."

"Since when do you need my permission, General West? I trust you, and that should be reassurance enough. Do what you think is right." Laura tried to paste a smile on her face, trying to hide the pain.

As West left the room, she noticed the looks of concern on her

pupils' faces. Her continuing attempts to smile brought only a pained grimace to her lips.

"I'll be all right, don't worry. The doctors haven't failed to fix me up yet. Although, I wonder why you would fear for a human's life." She tried to wheel herself closer to the bookshelf, but the pain was too much for her strength.

"Who was the ugly human that was here? Why does he hate you, and who is Blade?" The Prophet's voice stumbled over the words.

"Colonel Ackerson never liked me, and we've pretty much been at odds since we met. He thinks he's my superior officer, but the only thing superior about him is his rank; I doubt he ever did an honest day's work in his entire life!" She laughed mirthlessly, so different from the other times they'd heard her laughing; in comparison, it was like seeing an enraged beast where there had once been a docile creature.

"He calls me Blade because I have some skill with knives," she spoke again, traces of angry laughter still in her voice. "And if he had his way he'd kill me now and have done with it, the arrogant fool. He has no idea. . ." her voice trailed off and she shook her head sadly, or so it seemed to the Prophet.

"No idea about what?"

"No idea why I fight, why I put up with his tactics. It's not ambition, or the glory of the kill, that keeps me going." Laura pulled a photograph out of her shirt pocket. "It's them."

The Prophet took the picture and stared at the humans in it: though all of them looked the same to his eyes at first, he eventually noticed differences in height, face, and build. A number of the humans had a strong resemblance to Laura, and he noticed that one of the human males looked half-starved, but still strong. Another thin human male was there as well; this one was older and less thin, but not by much. There was also an elderly human male and female, who possessed several facial characteristics similar to his teacher's; two young human children bore a stronger resemblance to her brother. The Prophet looked up in time to see the look of understanding in Laura's dark eyes.

"Yes. They are my family: my father and mother, my brothers, my younger brother's wife and their children. I'll do anything to protect them, even kill, but that doesn't mean I'll enjoy it. Not all humans are mindless, cold-blooded vermin as you would have yourselves believe; most of us have hearts and souls, and all are intelligent."

The door opened, and a female in a white coat and violet clothing beneath hurried in; The Prophet recognized her from the photograph Laura had showed him; this was the woman she had called her mother. She wasted no time in pulling out a data pad and scanning Laura with an unusual instrument.

"Laura Elizabeth, what did you do to yourself this time?" the woman lectured in an irritated tone of voice, but the Elites and the Prophet picked up on the worry in her tone.

"It's a long story, Mom. Just tell me how bad the damage is." Laura seemed reluctant to tell her mother exactly what had happened.

"You've got some additional damage to your injuries, and there's some minor internal bleeding as well. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were kicked in the ribs: that's the only reason for the damage pattern. But no one's kicked you." She shot her daughter a sharp look. "Or have they?"

Trust her to notice, Laura thought. Chagrined, she nodded.

"You should have been more careful. What on Earth were you thinking, getting out of your wheelchair in the first place?" Laura rolled her eyes behind her mother's back, clearly uneasy and irritated at the whole deal. Her mother finally finished lecturing and looked at her, the Covenant in the room clearly forgotten.

"It's safe to say you won't be doing any more teaching for a while. Bed rest and biofoam for at least three days."

"Mom, no! All the progress we've made here will be lost! I can't quit now!" Laura protested.

"That's an order," the woman replied sternly. Laura wilted visibly.

"Yes, Dr. Gedeon," she replied, her tone suddenly sharp and formal. She forced herself to roll out of the room, not looking back. The Prophet approached the older female, whom Laura had called Dr. Gedeon.

"Will she be all right?" he asked, concern audible in his voice.

"She'll survive. Laura's pulled herself through hell before, and will again no doubt." The old doctor sighed. "She's a survivor, but I still worry about her."

"It is a mother's duty to worry."

"That may be, but it's a human's duty to worry in general." A small smile appeared, though the female's eyes were grave and sad. "Where Laura's concerned, there are times when she worries too much, and times when she doesn't worry enough. She's so scared sometimes, and so angry, that it's hard to help her. We do what we can, though; she's earned a few people's respect here. If only it were enough." She closed her eyes, remembering all the things her daughter had been put through, the hell she'd suffered at ONI's hands. _And no doubt there's even worse coming to her_, she thought sadly.

The Prophet listened silently to the elderly woman's words, wondering exactly what she meant when she said, "If only it were enough." It seemed that the woman was in despair, but why? _Is our teacher in danger of some sort?_ Judging by Laura's interaction with the ugly human earlier, it seemed so. Then he remembered the look in Laura's eyes when she was explaining her feud with the ugly human, Ackerson. _She was angry and sad. The human must have hurt her in the past, more than she had said._ For the first time, he pitied the strong human female that had captured and then educated him. The old alien

knew now that she was more than the vermin he had thought her at first; Laura had won his respect, and the respect of the Elites and the Grunts, which was no easy task. Suddenly, he found himself doing something unexpected: he silently prayed for her salvation.

33. Chapter 32: Miracle

I apologize in advance for these next two chapters: they're kinda long. Also, they are the reason this fic is rated M. If you are under 18 I recommend skipping these two. Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Miracle

****April 4, 2553 1121 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Laura was back in her quarters, now fully recovered from her stint as a POW. Well, almost. True, she had more allies now than she'd ever had before, all stemming from the fact of her surviving Covenant torture and not saying a word. She recalled with unusual clarity an incident a few days ago.

She was walking toward her quarters when a group of Helljumpers came after her. They weren't taking chances this time; keeping their distance, they shot her with tranquilizer darts, effectively paralyzing her. As they got ready to try and kill her, a voice stopped them and they turned to deal with it. While the Helljumpers backs were turned, Laura dimly noticed she was being surrounded by Marines, and two were helping her to her feet, helping her stand. By the time the Helljumpers turned around, Laura was surrounded by all the Marines she'd saved on the Covenant ship, and they were glaring at the Helljumpers.

"What do you think you're doing? This is a fellow soldier you were preparing to kick the shit out of!"

"Blade is a traitor, she sold us out to the Covenant! Why are you protecting her?"

"Blade is no traitor," a soft voice behind the Helljumpers said. They turned around to find a young Captain staring at them, a naval officer that had also been imprisoned with Laura and the other Marines. "She endured enough Covenant torture to kill one of their Hunters, and never told them anything. They threw everything they had at her, but she never broke, never said a word about Earth. By the time she helped us all escape, she had to be hospitalized for three or four weeks from what they did. If she were a traitor, would they have tortured her as long as they did? Would they have even taken her prisoner like they did? No. They would have left her on Earth to continue their spying. Maybe next time you decide to take action, try thinking a little first."

_The Helljumpers were shocked enough to disperse. Her newfound allies

helped her to the hospital for treatment for those tranqs, then to the CO's office to file a formal complaint; ONI was shocked by the number of witnesses in the case, and promised to look into it. She had checked independently and found they were actually checking the specifics of the case._

Life was finally beginning to look up for her, but not everything was all right. There was a gaping hole in her heart where her love had dwelt. He'd never come to see her in the hospital, never once asked about her. Not once did he even stop to see her during her recovery period, when she was working with the Covenant prisoners. She'd tried to rationalize it away saying that he was on a mission, but hacking into ONI's files had proven her wrong: no missions had been launched since she returned.

"Damn you, John. How could you do this to me?" She heard the pain in her own voice and broke down; lately, it didn't take much to hurt her, and it bothered her that she wasn't stronger. Soft footfalls behind her alerted her to a newcomer, but she didn't care enough to turn around and see who was there.

"What did he do, Laura?"

Linda's soft voice caused her to turn; she was the last person Laura would have expected to see (although in retrospect it made sense, since Linda had already broken into her bunk once before). She was standing there with a puzzled look on her face, which Laura supposed was because of her tears; she never showed her own pain if she could help it, and very few people on the base had ever seen her cry. Linda was one of the few people she could relate to, and the only one of the Spartans who seemed to genuinely appreciate her presence, so Laura decided to tell her everything: how she'd watched them land on the return from Reach, how she'd begun to admire the Master Chief at first for his abilities, how she'd finally grown to love him. Linda had guessed a lot of it, but waited until Laura was finished.

"Why didn't you tell him?"

"If ONI ever found out, they could have tried to use him as bait to kill me. I've seen what they can do, especially when they tried to use my own family as blackmail. I just couldn't put him through all of that, even if he did feel something for me. As far as he's concerned, I'm just SPARTAN-000, the deadly Blade. I certainly didn't try to fall in love with him, but it was easy for him to steal my heart without even trying."

"What makes you think he doesn't care for you? He came after you when you were taken captive."

"He was ordered to do that. Otherwise he probably would have left me to rot there."

"John was never ordered to rescue you," Linda replied quietly; she had a lot of things she needed to say to this woman, and she was going to say them one way or the other. Laura's head snapped around.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean ONI refused to let him come after you, and I can't remember

ever seeing him so angry when they said to leave you in the hands of the Covenant. He came on his own for you, put himself at risk of a court-martial to save your life. And while you were out cold in the hospital for a week, he refused to leave your room until the doctors were sure you would be okay. Once you started coming around, he left because he was afraid." Linda shook her head, amazement in her green eyes. "A man that could withstand a whole squad of Covenant Elites was afraid of a woman's feelings for him. He didn't even say anything, but I could tell. He'd always clam up whenever you were around, and if he needed to say anything his voice got harsher than usual. I finally forced the truth out of him a few days ago."

"Where is he?"

"At the moment, in a stockade or in the middle of a court-martial probably. I really don't know; he disappeared after you were fully recovered. All I know is that he cares for you, and has probably since you stood up to Ackerson the first time we were all in briefing together. It caught all of us off guard, but showed us what you were made of."

Laura didn't know what to do. This news was almost too much to absorb, but one thing was clear. She went to her computer and began to start it up.

"Thanks, Linda, but I'm going to have to cut our chat short. There are some things I need to find in ONI's database." She shot a meaningful glance at the other woman, who smiled slyly.

"I know nothing about it." With that, she left.

Lorienna came online immediately after startup. "Hello, Laura. What're we looking for today?"

"Information on the whereabouts of the Master Chief for the past three days. I want to know where he is and what he's doing."

"Looking now. Would this have anything to do with the conversation I overheard earlier?" The AI's tone was smug. She watched as Laura shook her head with suppressed laughter; the two were almost exactly alike, for good reason--Laura used her personality to create the AI.

"Lorienna! I hope nobody else heard that."

"Of course not." After a brief moment, Lorienna spoke again. "I can't find anything in ONI's files, but I did notice something in General West's logs. Surprisingly, he left this one untitled and without his usual encryptions." She played back a voice recording:

"_Laura, no doubt you're going to find this, in fact I'd imagine you're probably listening to it right now. By now you're probably wondering where your friend John is. Don't ask me how I know or what this is about, that's not important right now. I promise I'll explain it all later, if you're ever interested in hearing it. He came to me yesterday asking for advice on what to do. I knew it was complicated, but never could have guessed the entirety of it. I sent him off on some R&R to help him get things straightened out; he took my recommendation on camping at Silver Pond."_ Laura started: Silver

Pond was where she and Nicole had gone for that fatal picnic, and it was also one of her favorite places to just sit and think. "I hope everything works out, he's a fine man. Good luck, Lieutenant Morisson. West out."

****Silver Pond 1413 hours****

****North America****

A few hours later, Laura entered the glade where Silver Pond was at; the place was deserted except for a concealed memory-plastic cubicle, which was little more than a high-tech tent. There was no one inside it. "Probably out on a hike," she thought with disappointment. The pond looked inviting, though. "I can't believe I didn't bring my bathing suit! And on such a beautiful day, no less. I guess there's nothing for it." Making sure no one else was around, Laura stripped to her bare skin and dove into the pond. The water was the perfect temperature for a swim, and Laura made the most of it, splashing and frolicking like a four-year-old; it was rare that she was able to enjoy herself like this, which made the brief 'play-time' even more enjoyable. When she finally came out of the pond, the day was at its hottest. "I'll dry in no time at all," she mused as she lay on the grass. Sure enough, she was dry in about ten minutes; gathering up her clothes, she put them on and retreated to the shade of a nearby willow tree. Her dark hair was pulled back into its usual basic braid, which had kept it mostly dry while she swam; Laura undid it and let it fall free down her back to dry the rest of the way.

Nearby, the Master Chief was concealed in the undergrowth of bushes, watching the woman as she rested in the glade. Having gone out on a hike in the woods, he'd seen Laura enter and followed her as she headed to his campsite. He'd been watching Laura swim easily in the pond, then seen her come out and dry off in the sun. When she let down her long hair, which reached nearly to her waist, a shaft of sunlight caught part of it and turned the dark brown waves into a glistening curtain of copper silk. As he watched the transformed hair shimmer in the sun, he thought he'd never seen anything so beautiful in his life. Part of him wanted to go to her and hold her tightly and tell her everything he felt and how he couldn't stop thinking of her, but he was still afraid. "Does she really feel anything for me? She probably hates me for leaving." As he watched, Laura stretched out on her stomach and fell asleep in the shade of the willow tree.

It began to get dark as the Master Chief continued to watch the woman who'd stolen his heart. He felt the temperature grow cooler, and debated going back into his cubicle for a blanket, when he noticed Laura begin to shiver. "She's cold by now, and she's fast asleep still," he marveled. Rising from his concealment, he crossed the glade and lay down beside her; putting his arms around her, John was surprised when she pressed closer to him, still sleeping. He held her gently in his arms, wishing that he could stay like this forever. One strand of her hair curled down over her face, which had a look of peacefulness and bliss he'd never seen before; he gently brushed it away and returned his arm to her waist.

It was late when Laura woke up. She never meant to fall asleep, or stay asleep for this long. Feeling the chill of the night air, she realized that the cold hadn't been what woke her, but rather the sense of a presence by her side. When she tried to get up, she felt a

pair of strong arms gently but firmly tighten around her body, and heard a familiar voice whisper something she couldn't make out, even with her enhanced hearing. Her heart began to pound, a rush of heat flooded through her body. The night was cool, but she felt nothing except the heat of the man beside her. _John, how did you know I'd come here? How long will you keep toying with my heart?_ She tried again to escape his embrace, still afraid of what she felt. John wasn't having any of it; realizing she was trying to escape, he turned her roughly around so she could see his face.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came for a swim. What are you doing here, trying to ambush me at one of my favorite places?" She still couldn't tell him the truth. _What the hell was I thinking? I can't even talk to him without lying._ She tried again to struggle away, but his grip tightened.

"That was never my intent. As cool as it is right now, you needed the warmth: you were shivering when I lay down beside you, almost three hours ago."

"I've been in colder weather with no trouble before, and I don't need anything from you." She was beginning to get angry with him for making this harder for her. _I can't believe I'm still afraid to tell him the truth. How much longer can I keep this up?_ Then another thought struck her. _I was asleep beside him for three hours, and he didn't try anything! Why?_ "Let me go."

"You're not even trying to escape. I've seen what you're capable of, remember; if you really wanted to be free, you would be by now."

Laura stopped struggling. _Damn him for guessing so easily! It's almost as if he knewâ€¦_ She decided to try another tactic.

"Why are you even here, anyway?"

"I came to clear my head. It seems that lately all I think about is a woman who apparently can't stand me." He got up and ran his hand through his short dark hair. "I can't stop thinking about you, Laura, but if you think it's because I want you dead, you're wrong."

Laura waited breathlessly to hear more. Unfortunately, her waiting was cut short when John turned and headed into the woods. _Now he'll leave me, and I'll never see him again!_ She blundered in tears after him, afraid to lose him but too afraid to tell him the truth. After a while, having found nothing to show where he'd gone, Laura realized she had lost him after all. _What have I done? How could I have let him get away? Now I've lost him forever!_ Heartbroken and hurt, she headed back to Silver Pond.

John cursed himself for leaving, but knew he'd made the right choice; he needed time to think. When he heard Laura blundering after him, he hid and watched her trying to find him. Assuming she'd find him easily, since these were her stomping grounds and she knew them well, he was shocked when she stumbled right past him, dark hair flying around her as she turned her head frantically in every direction; the pain she obviously felt, as well as her tears, was blinding her to his trail. _She came after me, he realized. _She's feeling the same

thing, and she's obviously just as confused about it._ Resolve hardened in him with surprising speed, and he turned back to the pond, planning on having a few words with Laura when he found her again.

Laura stumbled blindly into the glade, tears streaming down her face, and fell to her knees crying bitterly. She no longer cared who saw her, or even what happened to her. All that mattered was that she'd driven away the only man she'd ever truly loved, all because she was afraid. _There's nothing left, he's gone, there's nothing left_ ran through her mind; had she been calmer she would have recognized the irrational thoughts and stopped them, but her grief was blinding her to any semblance of logic. Sobbing, she lifted her head and cried out to the stars.

"How could this have happened? What more can life take away from me? Would you take my life as well, since there's nothing left for me?" She stood up quickly and groped for her knives, only to remember that she'd left them in her quarters when she'd rushed out to find him. The surface of the pond shimmered silver in the moonlight for which it had been named, seemingly mocking her pain while at the same time offering her an escape from her grief. Recalling a verse she'd read somewhere, Laura spoke softly to herself, unaware that someone heard:

'_Water, water, cold and deep,_
Hold me fast that I may sleep.
Each new death is nothing more
Than the little deaths before.'

As she prepared to throw herself into the water, a strong hand reached out and grabbed her arm, as John pulled her around and looked in her eyes.

John had arrived in time to hear her quiet words and guess what she was planning: a plunge into the pond to end her pain. Somehow, he knew exactly what to do; before she could act, he caught her arm and spun her to face him. She could barely conceal her shock, but never got the chance to speak it; as she opened her mouth, he covered it with his own. His kiss was passionate, insistent, searching and exploring her mouth. She sighed, relaxing into his strong embrace, not protesting as he pressed her body into his and caught her hair, tugging her head back so he could kiss her even more deeply.

Laura felt afraid at first, but soon the feeling disappeared; it was replaced by an erotic sensation of heat flooding through her body. _It's a miracle,_ she thought dimly. She arched up into his body, pressing herself against him, feeling his muscles straining against her. Their bodies intertwined into a single whole, blending into something both frightening and wonderful. When they finally broke apart, all they could see was each other; neither could speak for a long time. Laura finally broke the silence, shivering with pleasure as John gently wiped away her tears.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was afraid. I thought you hated meâ€¦" He couldn't put it into

words, so she decided to save him the trouble; wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled his head back down and kissed him hard.

Together they fell to the ground, the long grass softening their landing, still embracing. Neither of them cared that they were out in the open on the banks of Silver Pond. Each was only aware of the other, the one they loved beside them. John had only imagined what this moment would feel like, to hold this woman in his arms; now that it was here, it was even more glorious than he'd dreamed. He kissed her even harder, his lips firm and insistent, his body hot against hers; Laura felt his need, and understood. They both needed to come together, at least for this night. _No matter what comes after, we need this night, this passion. We need each other _nowShe tugged at the drab military fatigues he was wearing, the need to touch him almost overpowering her. He pulled at her clothes, nearly ripping them off in his haste, wanting to touch her for reasons he only dimly understood. Her body was even more beautiful than he'd ever imagined, soft and smooth and warm, with only a few visible scars where she'd received serious wounds; most of those were pale white against her skin, which (while still pale) was darker than his own. He kissed the fresh, angry red scars from her latest brush with death as a Covenant captive, then moved to the older, paler pink ones from the plasma burns when they'd captured the Covenant cruiser, feeling her shiver at his touch. Moving his mouth to one breast, he caught one delicate tip in his mouth, hearing her gasp in response to his actions. Laura, meanwhile, was caressing his strong body, her fingers delicately lingering over his ribs, his chest, his arms. Abruptly, she leaned in and kissed his chest, tongue trailing across one nipple, the touch surprising him. He rolled her beneath him and kissed her even harder, pushing his body against her as he spread her long legs apart, somehow knowing exactly what he was doing. She arched her body up as he thrust downward, her lips never leaving his. He pulled away and brought his mouth down lower to her breasts, then to her belly, teasing her with his passionate kisses. She responded by touching him lightly across his chest, tickling him with her fingertips. He came back, then, annoyed by her teasing.

"How can you make fun of me like this?"

"For the same reason you're only teasing me." Her dark eyes sparkling with excitement and mischief, she rolled him back over, thrusting herself against him, kissing him, again and again until they were both out of breath. She caressed his face, his chest, smiling mischievously, her passion driving her to new levels of boldness. Before he could react, she kissed him even harder than before, her tongue caressing the inside of his mouth, teasing him even as she thrust herself down on top of him, trying to show him exactly what she wanted. Ending the kiss too early for his liking, her dark eyes held John's for a long while. Pulling away briefly, she reached down and touched him, her fingers gently caressing his erection and sending shockwaves throughout his body. Both of them felt as if a fire was consuming them, and the feeling was wonderful. She brought her head slowly back to his, stopping now and then to tease him with passionate kisses on his stomach and his chest, lips finally settling over his own once more.

John couldn't stand it anymore; he wanted her badly enough that he was going mad with desire, a desire only fueled by her teasing. He couldn't think anymore, all he felt was raw, primitive need; both of

them kissed harder, their passion becoming a war that neither one could win, and that neither one wanted to win. Abruptly he rolled her beneath him again and thrust even harder; she clung to him, arching into him each time he thrust. They came together, their climax sending waves of bliss through each of them, and when it was over they lay in each other's arms, exhausted. Laura smiled contentedly.

"About time you got the message. I was afraid I'd have to take drastic action."

"Well, maybe if you weren't trying to be so mysterious, I might've figured it out sooner." Both of them smiled at each other's words.

Neither of them needed to speak anymore, letting the silence of love speak for them. They had this one night, alone, and they were going to take full advantage of it. Whatever would happen in the future didn't matter, all that did was the here and now. Their naked bodies dripping with sweat, they clung together desperately, neither of them wanting to let go. Laura rested her dark head against his strong chest, her long hair clinging to her body in damp strands.

"I've been dreaming of this for a long time, just to be in your arms. I never thought it would actually come true."

"Then why are we just laying here?" John felt something stirring again in his groin, and realized he needed this woman, needed her more than anything else. Laura brought out something in him that he had never felt before; she made him complete in a way he would never have thought possible. He looked into her eyes and saw through them into her heart; there was both love and passion there, and the same, almost animalistic need he felt. She came to him again, touching him, caressing his broad chest with fingers that left a tingling sensation in their wake. His breath hissed in through his teeth as she reached down and touched him again, moving her fingers along his length, then reaching around and caressing his back before returning to tease him again by caressing his torso with her delicate touch.

"Indeed, why are we just laying here, when we could be doing so much more?" She lowered her head and pressed a kiss over his heart, a kiss that sent a tingling sensation through his entire body (or was that because of where she'd just put her hand?), then looked at him slyly, dark eyes twinkling with desire. He understood completely, capturing her mouth and holding it with his own. They came together again and again, while the night passed and the morning approached. Laura looked at the paling sky and grimaced suddenly, a worried look marring her features.

"I have to leave, before they notice I'm missing."

"Why?" John noticed a hint of fear in her voice, and felt anger rising in his chest; whatever she feared, he wanted more than anything to protect her from it. He held her closer than ever, stroking her long hair, unwilling to let her return to the base and face ONI alone again. Laura had never felt so safe as she did in his arms then, but knew what she had to do. She brought her hands up to his chest, fingers starting their erotic dance once more.

"If we ever get the chance, I promise I'll tell you everything."

Meanwhile, you could try asking Linda." At his sudden start Laura smiled. "She guessed the truth long before either of us did. We actually have her to thank for this night. Just believe me when I say I don't want to go back there."

"When will I see you again, Laura?"

"I'll come back, tonight, if you're still interested." Laura paused to caress his handsome features one more time, and whispered the strongest three words she'd ever said to a man, words she never used with anyone not family. "I love you."

She dressed quickly, retrieving her clothes from various places on the bank. Coming back to him, she pressed her body against his and kissed him one last time, putting all her feelings into it. Then she was gone, sprinting quietly through the glade, making no noise as she slipped away.

Three hours later, Laura climbed through the window of her quarters, only to face a smirking Lorienna.

"Have a nice night?"

"Better than usual. Don't look for me later."

"Ah, I see. Don't worry, no one knows you were gone, and they won't know tonight, either, if I can help it."

34. Chapter 33: Separation

Part II of the M-rated content. Again, if you are under 18 I recommend skipping this section. Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Separation

****April 5, 2553 0800 hours****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

One of Ackerson's watchdogs on base, taking a good look at Blade when she came on duty, noticed something different about her. She was more aggressive than usual, as if she was purposely putting on a show. _Of course, she usually does that, but something tells me this is different._ He decided to keep an eye on her, and find out what she was hiding this time.

Laura went through her day with her usual sarcasm, pointed remarks, and cold looks, but inside her a fire was raging, threatening to consume her. As soon as she could discreetly manage it, she left and headed for Silver Pond, bathing suit over her arm. When she arrived, she didn't see him, which disappointed her immensely. _Well, guess I'd better have a swim._ Again looking around to confirm she was alone, she stripped her clothes off. Just as she was reaching for her bathing suit, a wet arm snaked around her waist and pulled her into the pond. She tried to scream, but a warm mouth covered hers, and she looked up into John's beautiful brown eyes. Laura relaxed into his

kiss, trying to bring her body closer to his in the water, rotating her hips into him suggestively even as he pulled her against him. Their kisses became more passionate, seeking what they had had last night; it wasn't long before they found it again.

When they finally broke apart in the water, Laura looked him over. "Where were you? I didn't see you."

"I couldn't wait to see you again, so I thought a swim would cool me off." He laughed as she sent a stream of water in his general direction before she climbed onto the bank, a look on her face that all but screamed *_come and get me_*. John didn't wait for her to say a word as he climbed out after her and swept her glistening wet body into his arms. As one, their lips came together in passion, tongues intertwining and caressing, hands touching and moving. Her hair was still tightly braided, until John undid it and felt it come loose, covering her shoulders and flowing in dark waves over his arms. He carried her into his cubicle and lay her down in his sleeping bag, which he had unzipped and spread open. Laura watched as he laid himself down atop her, and shuddered in bliss as he kissed her breasts. He moved his kiss to her belly, then even lower, feeling the intensity of her ecstasy as she shivered at his touch. Laura bit back a scream as she felt his tongue on her body, going places she'd never believed possible, exploring her in ways that nearly drove her to the brink of sanity.

"Johnâ€¦" she whispered, his name a soft cry of pleasure against her lips. She wanted him to continue, yet wanted him to end this sweet torture he was inflicting upon her. "John, pleaseâ€¦"

Slowly he looked up, seeing the need in her eyes; he began to come back to her beautiful face. She refused to wait for him; rising suddenly, she grabbed him by the shoulders, pulled him against her, and locked her mouth onto his, her tongue forceful and insistent. Rolling him beneath her, she began to torment him the way he had her; he shivered as her delicate touch found a tender spot on his chest, and gasped when she pressed a passionate kiss there. Returning to his head, Laura began kissing him hard, to the point where they both felt the flames of their passion begin to consume them.

"Laura, don't stop," John groaned as she moved her lips to his chest once again and began to kiss his tender spot, her warm tongue gently massaging him into arousal as she closed her fingers around his length, then brought her hand back up to caress his chest. She looked up and smiled, breathless from her efforts.

"Now you know what you were doing to me earlier. I need you more than you can imagine, and yet you insist on teasing me." Her tone of voice indicated irritation, but the look in her dark eyes gave her away.

John didn't wait for her to say anymore. He grabbed her waist and pulled her closer to him, thrusting himself upward into her belly. She thrust down at the same time, kissing him passionately, wanting more than she dared take. Somehow John sensed it: rolling her beneath him, he thrust harder, showing her what he wanted even as she clung to him, arching into each blow he gave. Their kisses became even more frantic and passionate as they approached the sweet moment they both desired; when it came, John refused to leave her, keeping himself inside of her body. Laura took his head and placed it against her

breasts, watching him as he rested, arching her head over his and covering his face with her long hair. He looked up at her with love in his eyes, tangling his fingers amongst the ends of the silky brown strands.

"Was it difficult today?"

"No more than I expected. By now you want to know what I'm afraid of. As much as I hate to ruin the moment, you deserve to know." She was silent for a long while, trying to find the right words to express what she feared.

"ONI tried to use my family as blackmail once, and almost succeeded. They correctly figured I would do anything to ensure their safety, even give them the upper hand where I was concerned. Ackerson hoped that I'd kill myself in order to be free and save my family at the same time. It failed after a while, but the memory still haunts me. Knowing what they could do, what they've doneâ€¦ I didn't want you to have to go through that, John. That's why I tried to distance myself from you for so long, I wanted to protect you from them. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want them to use you." She saw the anger flare in his eyes as he comprehended this new information.

"What exactly makes you think I need protecting?" he muttered.

"Gee, I don't know, maybe because you know less about circumventing ONI than I do? I've been playing cat-and-mouse with them for years while you did exactly as you were told. If they went after you, you probably wouldn't know what to do!" _Great, now we get into the whole male pride thing_, Laura winced inwardly.

"I wouldn't know what to do?" he shot back at her, starting to get mad.

"Not this time, Chief. They know everything about you, and they know exactly how to bring you down, physically or psychologically. Trust me, I've seen it happen, they've tried it with me before. You really think you could handle them threatening, say, Linda or Fred? Wouldn't you do anything to protect them, even though they could take care of themselves?" Her eyes went vacant as she remembered what ONI had tried, the words they'd said when they'd threatened her brother's family, her family. John watched her, finally understanding why she wanted to protect him; as a squad leader, he did whatever was in his power, short of compromising the mission, to bring his people home.

"I'm sorry, Laura. I shouldn't have asked. Is there a way toâ€¦ stop ONI?"

"Unfortunately, no. All I can do is fool them, but it won't last forever." She sighed heavily. "Eventually, you'll have to return to active duty, and I won't be able to see you again."

"Then let's make the most of the time we have," John whispered as he cupped her breasts in his hands, hands that could easily kill a man but now were tenderly caressing her into arousal. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him intensely, trying to entice him to come to her again and succeeding; he lifted her into him and thrust into her as hard as he could, kissing her just as hard as she was, returning every stroke she made with one of equal intensity.

Their arms and legs intertwined as he rolled her over on to her back, passion taking hold and consuming them. Laura closed her eyes and cried out softly as the moment came over her, wave upon sweet wave. When it was over, she lay spent in the arms of a man she barely knew but loved with all her heart, a man who held her close to him and refused to let her go. He turned so they were both on their side and kissed her again, gently this time, brushing his lips over her eyes and settling them on her mouth, tenderly showing her how much she meant to him. She sighed against him, pulling as close to his body as she dared, taking comfort in his strength as he held her, afraid to let him go.

"John." The name came tumbling from her lips before she could stop it. At the sound he tightened his grip on her, pulling her so close that her breasts flattened against his chest. At that moment in time, he would have done anything to protect her, even if it meant spilling his own blood. He knew then how much he loved her, and saw the same thing when he looked into her dark eyes. Laura smiled to herself, in spite of the darkness she feared would be coming. _I've never been so happy in my entire life; if only we could stay like this forever_. Before she realized what was happening, John cupped her dark head in his hands, pressing it against his chest as he ran one hand down the smooth contours of her back. He couldn't get enough of her body, though it was his for the taking, but what truly captivated him was the spirit that was within. _If anything were to happen to you, I'd never forgive myself, _he realized. He held her close as he began to kiss her neck, sending tremors down every nerve in her body. She clung to him, wishing she could stop time and give them eternity together, wishing even more that she could be the woman he deserved. These thoughts vanished in an instant as he lifted her face to his and kissed her again, his tongue tracing a seductive pattern in her mouth that she understood. She caressed his body, her touch lingering on places she knew would bring him to her, feeling his kiss becoming more passionate as his desire grew. They lay together, bodies moving in a rhythmic dance, each contact resulting in more passion. Finally, John rolled Laura beneath him and thrust hard inside of her; her eyes widened as she felt it, and she arched into him again and again as he thrust, harder and harder they both threw themselves against each other. Their passion was increasing as they approached the moment that still eluded them. Each could feel the other's passion and frustration; they thrust against each other as hard as they could, as passionately as they could, kissing each other intensely. They climaxed together, each tight against the other as the moment passed. Both of them were tired and happy, their sweat glistening on their bodies as they held each other close.

Laura looked out at the sky, which was just beginning to pale. "I need to go."

"No, stay with me, Laura. Please stay." The ache in his voice overwhelmed her.

"John, if I stay, they'll know. I don't want to lose you, but I will if they find out." She wished she could explain the turmoil she felt, but one look in John's eyes told her he understood.

"Go, then. Butâ€¦"

She put her fingers to his lips, stopping the words he was trying to speak.

"John, you don't need to tell me anything. But you may have some explaining to do when you see your fellow Spartans again." The look on his face when she mentioned them was definitely amusing, to say the least. _After all_, she thought, _it's not every day you find out that you can drive someone to forget people they'd grown up with_.

"Damn! I'd forgotten all about them." John sat up, a truly embarrassed look on his handsome features. "You're right, we should both be going. But what if we meet on base?"

"Pretend you don't care about me. It'll be easier for you than for me." She kissed him passionately one last time before she slipped out of the cubicle, gathered her clothes, and left the glade to return to the base. Neither of them realized that they had been watched the entire time by an ONI special operative.

So that's what Blade's been hiding, the spook thought as he watched Blade and the Master Chief together. _The Colonel will be interested to hear about this._ He stayed hidden until after Blade left, then headed back to base by a different route. As soon as he got back to ONI's base headquarters, he went to find Colonel Ackerson.

"Sir, I have some news you may find interesting."

****April 6, 2553 1642 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

That afternoon, Laura was working on a new shield generator when Lorient's holographic figure swirled into place beside her, her face displaying a look of worry.

"I've got some bad news, Laura. ONI was apparently observing your liaison with the Master Chief. I don't know how they found out, but Ackerson's issued orders sending him to the frontlines tomorrow." The soldering iron Laura had been holding crashed to the floor (fortunately the thing was ice cold, and hit wooden flooring anyway) as it slipped from trembling fingers.

"Damn them! Damn him! How could they? How could he?" Laura whispered with barely restrained anger. She was so upset she didn't realize someone else had entered the room.

"I don't know, Laura, but it seems you were right about him." Laura whirled around to see John standing behind her. She didn't think twice about throwing herself into his arms, tears pouring down her face. John held her close as he kissed her gently, comfortably.

"How did you find me, John? For that matter, why did you come here? ONI keeps cameras all over the place."

Lorient smirked, an almost sadistic look of glee on her holographic features. "Don't worry, as far as they know, you just fell asleep

after sitting down to take a break from working on the new shields. With the long hours you spent on them the other night, it's not surprising. They won't even think to try looking for you for a while. Shall I busy myself for a few minutes?"

Laura nodded, then turned to the man she loved with all her heart. "What shall we do? We can't stop them, but they're determined to punish me for being strong, and desperate to keep me miserable."

"Don't worry. I've told Linda what happenedâ€"almost everything." His dark eyes sparkled with uncharacteristic excitement. "She'll help you if you need anything. However, I don't ship out until tomorrow. Shall I come back later, much later?"

"Wait until it gets dark, then head past the warehouse; no one goes back there and it's literally an unwatched area. You can get here from there without being seen. Tap twice on the east window." She leaned closer and whispered in his ear, "That's almost right next to my bed."

John felt a rush of heat in his groin at the feel of her breath by his ear; it was all he could do not to take her standing right there. As it was, he could barely keep from trembling at the thought of being with her one more time. He turned her face to his and kissed her hard, pressing her against the wall; Laura felt his body pressing into her and realized how much he needed her. She reached down and touched him through his fatigues, smiling as he shivered with pleasure.

"Save it for tonight, loverboy. I promise you'll need all the energy you can get."

****April 6, 2553 2000 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****Camp Hayes****

Laura was waiting in her room at 8:00 that night when she heard two taps on her bedroom window. Peering out cautiously at first, she opened the window at once as wide as she could; a muscular form slipped in and waited until she'd closed the window and the curtains, plunging the whole room into complete darkness, a darkness only a Spartan could see in. Once she'd blocked the window, Laura turned around and threw herself into John's arms. He held her tightly against him, kissing her passionately, pressing her against his body. She pulled at his clothes, wanting him to take her right there. As soon as she'd loosened his belt and started in on removing the rest of his uniform, John pinned her against the wall, kissing her deeply, feeling her arch into him with each kiss. His hand slipped under her nightshirt, touched her, stroked her, brought her nearly to the edge as he kissed her, hearing her moan with longing. When he pulled away to remove his uniform, her sense of disappointment was almost tangible, until he came back to her, ready to finish the job. Bracing her against the wall again, he pulled the nightshirt up and thrust into her, feeling the urgency as much as she did. Laura didn't shy away, but responded with equal enthusiasm, waiting for the sweet climax they both desired. When it washed over them, she sagged against the wall, momentarily worn out by the unexpected

passion.

"Wow. I had no idea you were that passionate." Her voice was breathless from their combined exertions. John looked at her and grinned.

"If you hadn't stopped me, that's exactly what I would've done earlier. I couldn't wait any longer. In fact, I'm thinking we'd best get on with our night, since we've only got eight hours together."

Laura smiled and gestured to her bed, then gasped when he scooped her up and carried her there. Laying her down in the clean white sheets, he settled himself on top of her and began to kiss her once more, his tongue hot in her mouth as he kissed her. She groaned with pleasure and touched him in the tender area on his chest, caressing him, knowing what the response would be. John turned and caught her hand, pinning it to the bed as he kissed her even harder, thrusting down into her, needing her more than she knew. She held him tightly, coming to him again and again, clutching his shoulders as her climax came, wave upon wave. John came after her, and rested in her arms when it passed, holding her tight against him, unwilling to let her go. She ran her fingers through his short hair, marveling at how well he wore the standard military buzz-cut. Hearing him sigh, Laura looked in his eyes, seeing his discomfort.

"John, what's wrong?"

"I don't want to leave you here, Laura. You may be only Blade, but you're my Blade, and the thought of leaving you alone with Ackerson and his wolves makes me sick." Pissed off is probably more like it, he thought to himself, but kept his mouth shut.

"I'll be all right, I've been alone before now, just promise me you won't get yourself killed." Her eyes went blank for a moment at the thought of him dying. I don't want to lose you, John.

"I have no intention of dying, so you can relax about that." He reached down inside her shirt and ran his hands up her back, sending rivers of pleasure down her spine. Laura rolled him over and began to bring him back to her, teasing him into arousal, kissing him passionately as she thrust herself down upon him. For every passionate stroke she made, he returned each one with even more passion, sending waves of pleasure through them both. Their desires grew with each passing second, until they finally lay exhausted in each other's arms, and the bedsheets lay scattered on the bed or on the floor. Laura looked at the man lying beside her with love in her eyes.

"Are you all right, John? Can I get you anything?"

"More energy would be perfect, since I appear to be tired out." His tone of voice indicated he was not tired in the least.

"Hmm, not sure how much I can do about that, even though I did warn you earlier. But there is one thing I can do to lift your spirits, among other things." Kissing him briefly, she pulled away and knelt in front of him; lifting the hem of her nightshirt, she yanked it over her head, revealing her bare body to his admiring gaze. Coming back to him, she placed one of his hands on her breasts and wrapped

her arms around his neck. John felt her bare skin beneath his palm, and then sensed himself hardening. He rolled her over and kissed her hard and long, the touch of his lips leaving her breathless as he fed the flames inside her. Their hands wandered caressingly over each other's bodies, each touch bringing them even more arousal, even more need. Laura shivered as John's touch found her soft place, just below her ribs. Moving his head down, he kissed that tender spot passionately, heard her sigh in pleasure as he touched her.

"My turn," John whispered hoarsely, an almost evil grin on his face. He continued to kiss her there as his fingers caressed her thighs. A groan of frustration escaped her throat, causing him to look into her eyes; the passion in them enveloped him, and he came back, kissing her hard as he thrust himself down into her, both of them shuddering as he entered. They came together like that for the rest of the night, and when it was almost over, they held each other close, afraid to let go.

"John, I wish you could stay. If I hadn't gotten careless none of this would have happened."

"It was only a matter of time before they found out, it would have happened eventually. Still, I am glad we've had this time together, at least."

Laura looked out the window through a hairline crack in the curtains; it was still dark, but she had no idea how long it would last. Kissing him deeply again, she left his arms and crossed the room. A moment later she came back with something in her hand.

"A little something to remember me by when you leave," she whispered as she placed something in his hand. John stared at the pair of dogtags she had given him: SPARTAN-000 MORISSON, LAURA E.

"What are these?"

"I had them when I was in training, in case of an accident. No idea why I kept them, but I'm glad I did, now. Take them with you, so you don't forget me." She turned away so he wouldn't see the tears gathering in her eyes. _Sometimes it really sucks being a woman, we're real saps sometimes._

John pulled her backwards into his arms, pressing her back against his chest, and kissed her neck, the touch of his lips causing her to shiver in pleasure and arch her head back for more. "How could I ever forget you, _alaya_" he whispered along her neck.

Hearing the word triggered something in her memory: _alaya_ was a Forerunner word that meant _beloved_. The significance didn't escape her, either, and she smiled: this would be their secret, his name for her.

"So you found out the meaning? I meant to tell you before."

"Corin thought it was ridiculous at first. I saw the memory on the Covenant ship, after you left the room. I wanted to tell you then, but I couldn't. You kept yourself away, and I couldn't come near you to tell you."

"Oh, John, I'm so sorry. I was convinced you hated me, afraid that

ONI had sent you to kill me, afraid to love you. If only I hadn't been so stupid!"

John held her gently in his arms, turning her around to face him, and kissed her lightly on her eyes, throat, his lips finally settling on her mouth and kissing her gently, trying to comfort her before he left.

"I have to go, _alaya_. Now I know how hard it was for you to leave me both nights we were together."

"John, be careful." _I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to you._

Crawling reluctantly out of her bed, John dressed quickly, putting on the dogtags she had given him around his neck; Laura was standing by the window when he finished. Kissing him passionately one last time, Laura opened the window and looked out; when she saw the coast was clear, she moved aside to let him out. Pausing at the window, John kissed her one last time before slipping into the remaining night. Laura looked out after him, the tears she could no longer hold back streaming down her face. _Be careful, John. Please, come back to me safely._

35. Chapter 34: Loyalty

Whew! Sorry for the delay, but things have been busy on this end! Anyway, here's the next chapter for all my loyal readers!
D

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Chapter Thirty-Four: Loyalty

****June 12, 2553 1142 hours****

****Blade's Bunkhouse****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

It had been about two months since the Master Chief had been ordered away from Earth on a mission, all because Ackerson had found out how much Laura loved him. Something had dimmed in her over the months, a fact not lost on her family and friends. She refused to tell them anything, though, and constantly hacked into ONI's database in search of information on the Chief. It was through these searches that she found some information which, while not quite what she was looking for, was disturbing nonetheless. _No, it can't be!_ But the information was clear, and there was only one place where she could go for help. Quickly stowing supplies into several duffel bags, she headed out the door, or tried to.

"And just where do you think you're going, missy?" Lorienna's voice floated around the room, cold and sharp, almost as if she could read Laura's mind.

"I need to talk to my students, and then I'm going on a mission."

"Then I'm coming with you," Lorienna stated bluntly. "You'll need my help and you know it. And don't start telling me about it being too dangerous: your going alone is bad enough."

Laura didn't have time to argue, so she moved to the computer terminal and dumped her AI friend into a data chip. Stowing that in a small hip-satchel along with a series of microwave transmitters, she walked out the door and didn't look back.

****ONI Building 1202 hours****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

The Covenant POWs were finally adjusting to life among what they had been led to believe as the human vermin: many of them were actually content among the humans. Several of the Grunts sat in a corner by themselves chattering and practicing the new language they'd learned from Laura, while the Elites stood in another corner watching the door: old habits died harder in them, even though they were treated well. All of a sudden, the POWs perked their heads up at a commotion outside the door. The door opened moments later to reveal their teacher, a fierce look on her face that frightened the Grunts and shocked the Elites and the Prophet; it was a look that they would have expected to see on an Elite or a Brute, but never on a human.

"I need your help," Laura stated bluntly, as was her way when she had something on her mind.

"Why would such a formidable warrior need help?" one of the Elites warbled in surprise.

"My father has been taken, and I am the only one who can save him. I need to know where they will take prisoners, and how I can get there safely."

"If your father is taken, why does your race not go to save him?" the Prophet replied.

"Because they've already given him up for dead," Laura spat in disgust; the others knew her anger wasn't directed at them, but it still worried them a little. _If she is this ferocious in anger, one can only wonder what she is like in battle, _the Prophet thought.

Realizing she was taking out her anger on her only allies, Laura stopped and forced herself to act calmly. Taking a deep breath she explained, "Even if he is dead, I can at least bring his body back for a decent burial. I owe him that: he never gave up on me, even when everyone else outside of my family did. Just tell me where I need to go." She added in a heartfelt whisper, "Please."

One of the Elites stood up along the back wall; he towered over Laura, but his voice was calmer and more respectful than she'd heard before.

"I will go with you to free your father. Such loyalty as you have shown him should be assisted." Looking at Laura as the Elite said this, the Prophet saw gratitude and hope lighting up in her dark eyes, but they were quickly darkened by a shadow of fear.

"No, you can't. If you leave the base, my superiors will know, and things could get bad." She was interrupted by a tugging on the leg of her blacksuit; Yipin and a few of his fellow Grunts were clustered around her.

"Laura, we help. We come." Yipin chattered excitedly, glad for a chance to help his friend. Laura smiled down at the group of Grunts, and touched Yipin's head gently.

"No, Yipin, it's too dangerous. You'll be killed if you come, and we would be moving too quickly for you to keep up, and I don't want to risk leaving you behind. Stay here, where it's safe." Yipin almost looked upset at her words, but he knew she was right: they would need to move quickly, far more quickly than any of his kin could move.

The old Prophet was moved by the fact that Laura had won the respect of the Grunts; normally cowardly creatures, these were now volunteering to walk into danger for their 'friend' and actually had to be dissuaded. He was not the only one so moved: the remaining Elites stood up and moved forward as one. The Elite who volunteered first spoke for them all.

"We will go with you. You will need our assistance to free your father." He noticed the worry in her dark eyes and added. "We give our word to not escape." The other Elites nodded assent.

"And the word of an Elite is the word of honor itself," Laura smiled, hope rekindling in her eyes. "I thank you, but the danger is too great."

"It will be greater for you to go alone," The Prophet pointed out from the shadows; it was the first he'd spoken all through that exchange. "I will tell your leaders where they have gone. Go. Free your father. I ask only that I be allowed to meet him on your return."

Laura bowed in gratitude and turned to the door. The Elites followed her and saw the guards she had incapacitated, and their mandibles parted in astonishment; they hadn't realized just how skilled Laura could be, but the unconscious guards were proof enough. She picked up a number of duffel bags outside the door and led them to a docking bay and into a small human dropship. Dropping the duffel bags she'd gathered, she went to the cockpit and launched the ship. Once they cleared the atmosphere, she docked with a small freighter and quickly herded the crew out of the ship and on to the freighter. Having stowed her supplies and sat down in the pilot's seat, she pulled a data chip from her hip-satchel and slid it into the computer console. A voice broke out immediately, one that sounded just like Laura.

"Well, you've really stirred up the hornet's nest now, Laura. I'm picking up a lot of radio chatter, wondering what the hell you're doing with this freighter."

"Just get us out of here, Lorienna. Pick a random vector and we'll plan accordingly."

A few hours later, they were sitting in a system that had been glassed by the Covenant, and Laura was trying to plan her next move. She had plenty of weapons with her: an assault rifle, a pistol, and several captured Covenant weapons she'd recovered from previous missions and 'borrowed' from the ONI weapons labs. Beside them on the table were medical supplies and a holographic generator as well as her now-standard gear: blacksuit, portable shield generator, camouflage generator, and her combat knives. For some reason, her good _sais_ were there as well: some inner voice had told her to bring them. A carved wooden flute was there too, in case she needed to slip a message to her father while posing as an Elite.

"My original plan was to disguise myself as an Elite and pose as one who escaped from Earth, in the hopes of at least learning where my father was. Now it seems I'll have to alter that, because from what you've told me, they'll check my DNA and figure out I'm human real quick." She scowled, trying to think of a way around that, but looked up when one of the Elites managed to catch her eye.

"Let us go and find your father," he said. "We can pose as escaped prisoners far more easily than you. We also know where he will most likely be, and it will be easier for us to pass a message on to him in secret."

"As long as I can be there to help him escape," Laura said quietly, a sad look crossing her face before it set in concentration. "Show me where he'll be on the star charts, and Lorienna will plot a course. Meanwhile, we'll have to figure out how to not get shot out of the sky for being in a human freighter. Let's snap to it, we've got a lot of work to do."

"Aye aye, Captain Obvious," her own voice echoed back, bringing a look of pained annoyance to Laura's face.

While the Elites (assisted by Lorienna) manned various stations on the bridge, Laura sat down and wrote a message on a piece of paper, signing it in a way that only her father would recognize. She rolled it up into a tube and slipped it inside the wooden flute she'd brought with her, leaving a corner just barely visible at the edge of the wood. Her stomach jolted suddenly as the freighter left Slipspace and jumped into hell: a hell of Covenant warships surrounding what looked like a Covenant orbital platform (similar to Cairo Space Station orbiting Earth, only larger and creepier) and preparing to fire plasma torpedoes. Activating the refrigeration unit in her suit, she waited as the Elites replied to a flurry of hails. She sighed in relief when the Covenant powered down their weapons.

"We have been ordered to dock with the _High Charity_, where we will be escorted to debriefing." She couldn't tell which Elite had spoken, but acknowledged it with a nod.

"Okay, I'll just hole up here. One thing to take care of first, though. Lorienna?"

A resigned sigh echoed around the cabin. "I'm ready, Laura. Just dump me and hide me."

Laura tapped a series of buttons and watched as the terminal spit out Lorient's data chip, which she immediately took and slipped back into the hip-satchel. She flicked on her camouflage generator and disappeared just as the ship docked with the huge orbital platform, the High Charity.

****Estimated June 15, 2553 0631 hours****

****Unknown System, Covenant City **_**High Charity**_**

Aro 'Benamee clicked his mandibles in relief as he and his fellow Elites left the council chamber. Part of him wondered why he was lying to his own people, but he remembered Laura and all she had done: how she'd defied her own superior to protect a Grunt, how she'd repeatedly petitioned for them to see a little of her planet, how she'd come to win the respect of all of them. It was for the sake of the one who had taught him so much that he was defying the will of the Prophets; she had earned his respect, and his affection to a degree. There was a spirit in her the match of any Elite, and more than enough honor and wisdom to match a Prophet.

'Benamee slowed as he neared the prison area, and remembered the instructions given to him by the council: he was to interrogate the human prisoners and bring whatever knowledge he could glean before the council. At least, he thought, that's what I shall appear to do. In his hand, 'Benamee held the simple wooden tube that Laura had prepared. He stopped and nodded at the cell guards.

"The Council has sent me to interrogate the human filth," he stated, trying to put a sense of distaste in his voice; most Elites felt sickened by being near the humans, as he once had felt. The guards nodded, deactivated the force field, and moved aside; when he had done so 'Benamee entered the cell, his plasma pistol aimed at the humans.

All of the prisoners were weary. 'Benamee realized they were in no real condition to fight, but kept his pistol trained on them anyway. He counted eighteen of the humans, and noticed how all of them kept glancing at a male human in a corner of the room. This human stood up and walked toward 'Benamee, motioning the other prisoners back. He was not overly tall, and looked quite old, but he appeared solid and strong as one in the prime of life. As the human locked eyes with 'Benamee, the Elite swore he saw Laura's dark eyes and intense gaze.

"What are you doing here? Haven't you tortured us enough?" the human thundered, his deep voice surprising the guards and 'Benamee's fellows.

"I am here to interrogate you, not torture you, human," he thundered back, his voice laced with what he hoped sounded like scorn.

"So, you speak English? It'll do you no good. I'll never tell you anything, and you'll have to kill me. None of us will lead you to Earth." 'Benamee regarded the old human with what appeared to be a cold, indifferent look; in reality, he was gazing at the old one with something akin to respect, noting many things he had seen in his human teacher, Laura. This must be her father, he decided. They

both have similar mannerisms._

"We do not need Earth's location anymore. I have escaped from Earth, and the one who would have stopped me lies dead." He saw the human's face pale a little and knew his act was succeeding. "A strong warrior, for a human female. If she had been an Elite she would have made a formidable ally. As a human, she now lies with the rest of the dead vermin who stood in our way."

The old human's hands clenched into fists, almost as if he were fighting some form of pain or rage. "You're lying, trying to trick us. It won't work."

'Benamee knew what to do next; opening his hand, he tossed the wooden tube on the floor of the cell, and walked away. He still had his 'report' to make to the council. As he walked off, he heard a cry of rage and grief echoing behind him. _So, he really was her father. Now we must wait for the proper time to free him._

Colonel Pete Morisson stared at the simple wooden flute in his hand. He remembered all the hours Laura used to spend carving flutes, panpipes, and other things; it was one of the few times she was truly happy. Now she was dead, killed on the one place they had all thought to be safe from the Covenant; she was probably the only person capable of stopping the prisoners' escape, and ONI had no doubt sent her alone to stop them, all because she was a Spartan. _I never should have let ONI take you. Laura, I'm so sorry._ He was still thinking this when one of the other prisoners, a young ensign under his command, caught his attention.

"Sir? There's something in here." The Ensign carefully tugged at a scrap of paper protruding from the end of the flute. Colonel Morisson moved the Ensign's hand and pulled out a rolled note. Unrolling it, he whispered to the others:

'The Elite who left this is on our side. He and some of his fellow Elites were POWs, and they've come to help you escape. Trust them: they've sworn on their honor not to betray us. Fear not, they'll get you home.'

The note was not signed in any traditional manner, instead there was a symbol inscribed at the bottom of the sheet of paper: a line with a pair of curves meeting in the middle, causing it to look like a lopsided cactus or an oddly-drawn X. He recognized the symbol, though: it was an elf-rune from one of his daughter's and wife's favorite books. Specifically, this particular rune symbolized the letter L. If the rune wasn't proof enough, the tone of the message pointed to only one possible writer. _Laura,_ he realized. _Laura sent them, or she's here too. What in hell was she thinking?_

****Estimated June 22, 2553 1642 hours****

****Unknown System, Covenant City **_**High Charity**_**

Laura waited in the cargo bay of the 'captured' freighter, moving periodically from area to area so no one would spot her. She'd been hiding for about a week when her Elite friends showed up. Their leader, whom she finally learned to be called 'Benamee, pretended to speak to his fellows, when Laura caught the agreed-upon code

phrase.

"Be ever vigilant and thorough when searching this ship, my brothers. Should we find this human AI that the vermin spoke of in his cell, it may try to trick us to our death. Yet fear not, for _your honor will be a light before you,_ and will illuminate the AI to the path to wisdom."

Laura watched the Elites disperse, in theory to search for an AI, and moved quietly up behind 'Benamee.

"'Benamee, I'm here. My active camouflage is on."

"Laura, it is good to hear your voice. Your father is alive, and we are planning an escape as we speak." 'Benamee moved to a computer terminal as he said this, keeping up the appearance of searching for an AI. "It will be difficult, but I will help you find a way."

"Already taken care of, I think. All we need is an excuse to get him off the ship." She paused a moment. "Is he the only one, 'Benamee?"

"No, there are others. There may still be a way. As you said, all we need is a reason to get them off the ship, and all is well."

"Well, what about a stealth mission? Suggest one of your Elites taking the freighter to explore what's left of human space undetected, and then arrange to transfer the rest of the prisoners elsewhere, perhaps to the front lines where their knowledge of human battles can be of better use."

"Your plan is well considered. It may work, but it will not be easy: I do not know what kind of excuse would serve best." Laura noticed what seemed to be a troubled look on his face.

"I couldn't tell you, really. It was just an idea, but maybe you know how to make it work."

"Perhaps. But I must find an AI to give to the council or all will be lost." 'Benamee was now visibly troubled, until Laura reached into her pocket and pulled out a data chip, which she set down while making it appear to have been ejected from the terminal.

"A false AI, good enough to keep them busy for a while. It's not much more than an echo, really. Something I whipped up while I was waiting." Laura smiled even though she knew her friend could not see it, and from the sound of her voice 'Benamee could tell she was truly pleased.

"Thank you, my friend."

Two days later one of the prisoners had been taken from the cell, and none of the other humans knew for sure what had become of him. Colonel Morisson and the others were worried, and trying to remind themselves that they had allies when a group of Elites stopped in front of their cell, speaking brusquely with the guards. Apparently it was a heated discussion about the prisoners. The Colonel was wondering what was going on when he noticed one of the Elites moving a hand behind its back. The hand began moving in subtle gestures,

alien fingers flicking quickly, out of sight of the other Elites. He recognized the hand signals, despite the rough errors from the alien physiology: they belonged to an alphabet used by UNSC military personnel. _Rescue in progress, stand by._ A terse message, but the prisoners found it reassuring. The cell guards finally relented, and the force field in front of their cell was deactivated. The lead Elite, the one who had passed the message to them through the flute, entered and grabbed the Colonel roughly.

"You will come with us, all of you."

Even if they'd wanted to run, the humans knew better than to try: their lengthy captivity had left them in less than ideal physical shape. Their only choice was to follow the Elites as they were marched to the docking bay. The 'prisoners' were marched through a cargo hatch of what they recognized as a Phantom-class dropship just as an alarm began to blare. The Elites, reacting to the alarm, hurried through the hatch and closed it. One of them sat behind the pilot's chair and flew them out of the _High_ _Charity_'s docking bay. Once they cleared the station, the pilot Elite began heading them toward an asteroid belt at the far edge of the system, but the dropship was being pursued by Seraph fighters; the Elite sent the dropship spinning into a barrel roll, dodging plasma bolts as they continued towards the belt. All of a sudden, the pursuit broke off and returned to the _High Charity_, and the pilot continued moving towards the asteroid belt.

'Benamee was puzzled by the Seraph fighters' departure, and looked at the Elite next to him. The image flickered for a moment, then faded into the figure of a human female. She continued to study readouts and kept them on course for the asteroid belt, and the freighter which had been 'sent' on an infiltration mission two days earlier.

"Why did they turn away? We were no match for them," 'Benamee warbled in confusion.

"The false AI I gave you earlier contained a computer virus, primitive and barbaric by today's standards, but effective nonetheless. It's disabled everything except life support, ship-to-ship communications, and navigation to a degree: they'll still be alive onboard the ships, but they can't navigate except for the fighters to return to the docks. I've tried to ensure that no other Covenant were harmed; I owed you that much at least. Besides, I'm tired of killing. I'm tired of this war, 'Benamee." A worn, saddened look crossed her human features, one that took 'Benamee by surprise: he had never seen her look soâ€|defeated.

"I do not understand. Is there not glory in battle?"

"For others, maybe, but not for me. I was never given a choice, and I have been used as a weapon for so long that I want nothing more than to avoid the battlefield. War for me is nothing more than butchery now. All I want is a chance for peace, a chance to escape all the killing. If I could get out of the military, I would." She returned to her readouts as they approached the freighter, leaving 'Benamee to ponder her words.

The freighter was hidden in the shadows of a large asteroid. As Laura maneuvered the dropship closer, the other ship's cargo bay doors

opened and she piloted the dropship in with expert skill. Turning on her hologram again as the freighter's cargo bay pressurized, she transformed into an Elite once more.

"Time to get out of here, before we're caught."

****June 27, 2553 2301 hours****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Fifteen hours later, the freighter returned to Earth space, and the captured Covenant dropship docked on the planet. Once the ship had landed, the doors opened and the prisoners filed out to be greeted by their families: Laura had arranged for a complete passenger list to be sent to High Command, asking that the families be notified. Using her holographic projector to disguise herself as a Naval rating, she slipped out with the rest of the prisoners and faded into the background as she had been so well trained to do.

Colonel Morisson had just stepped out of the ship when his twin grandchildren, Alex and Katrina, attacked him, screaming "Grandpa! Grandpa!" for all to hear. They were followed by his two sons, his daughter-in-law and his wife, all teary-eyed and smiling. Each enthusiastic greeting brought renewed tears to the old man's eyes as his family welcomed him home. One person was missing, though, one he'd been hoping to see.

"Oh, Pete, you're alive! We've been so worried!" his wife, Dr. Frances Gedeon cried as she threw her arms around him, her own tears leaving a damp patch on his tattered uniform; for a moment, he forgot about Laura and all the rest as he and his wife wept in each others' arms.

"I missed you too, Frances. I missed everyone." Wiping his eyes and looking around at his family surrounding him, he again noticed his daughter's absence. "Where's Laura?"

They grew noticeably confused. "She went after you," Matt said in surprise.

At that moment, everything fell into place: the message in the flute, the hand signals, the skillful yet human piloting of the dropship and the freighter. Colonel Morisson broke away from his family and sprinted swiftly into the cockpit of the dropship that had brought them home. Seeing what had been left on the pilot's seat for him to find brought a strangled cry of anguish from his throat.

'Benamee had left the dropship and was watching the Grunts who, disappointed at having been left behind, were now pressing his brothers for details on the mission and Laura's father. Having turned away to view the human reunions, he was watching when Laura's father broke away from his family and sprinted into the dropship, faster than he'd expected from a weary human. He heard the cry, and moments later saw the human move slowly out of the dropship, holding something in his hands. Edging closer, 'Benamee saw him holding a pair of unusual knives: curved points on either side of a long slender blade. The handles were set with blue stones that winked and sparkled innocently in the sun. _Beautiful, yet no doubt deadly,_ he

thought. The human saw him looking at the knives and began to speak.

"I gave these to my daughter when she was still young. How did they wind up here? And where is my daughter?"

"I know not, but I know she lives. She returned with us, but that is all I know." 'Benamee paused and spoke again.

"She refused to accept that you were dead, and went to rescue you; she would have gone alone, but we refused to let her: the dangers were too great. She is the soul of honor and loyalty." Seeing his cell guards, the Elite walked away, leaving the Colonel in stunned silence.

Laura stayed in her holographic disguise until she was sure no one else was nearby, and once she was sure she switched it off. She continued on to her quarters, unlocked the door, and stopped short when she saw Ackerson waiting for her, a look on his face that meant no good.

"Well, well, well, we have caused some trouble, haven't we?"

Groaning inwardly, Laura prepared for the inevitable.

36. Chapter 35: Endgame?

Well, as per many requests, here's the next chapter for all my readers. I apologize for the shortness, but I'm in a bit of a quandary at the moment. Anyway, enjoy!

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Endgame?

Laura stayed in her holographic disguise until she was sure no one else was nearby, and once she was sure she switched it off. She continued on to her quarters, unlocked the door, and stopped short when she saw Ackerson waiting for her, a look on his face that meant no good.

"Well, well, well, we have caused some trouble, haven't we?"

Groaning inwardly, Laura prepared for the inevitable.

****June 28, 2553 1431 hours****

****ONI Building****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

It had been several months since John had seen Laura last; he missed her more than he'd thought he would. Several times during brief periods of quiet when he couldn't sleep, or when he'd finished

cleaning his gear, he found himself fingering the dogtags she'd given him, which he kept hidden from the other soldiers; since he couldn't wear them under his Mjolnir armor, he kept them in his belt compartment so he'd always have them close by. Finally, he found himself heading back to Earth with a shipload of Marines, and as soon as he landed he was determined to try and see her again. Once he finished his debriefing, about a half-hour after he'd landed, he was approached by two of his fellow Spartans, who had been keeping an eye on Laura. The looks on their faces were grim.

"Good to see you back, Chief," Fred commented, a hint of humor in his voice, but he seemed bothered by something. Actually, both of them were uneasy, which made John wonder what was going on.

"Good to be back. What's happening?"

"Nothing good, Chief," Linda muttered. She'd been spending a lot of time with Laura, and found her company almost as enjoyable as she did sniping, until fairly recently. "She took some of the Elites and went AWOL a few weeks ago to rescue her father."

"What?" John was surprised, although in retrospect he realized this shouldn't have shocked him: Laura was a maverick, she always had been, so going Absent Without Official Leave (AWOL) would have been no big deal for her.

Fred broke in, "She came back yesterday with her father and a squad of captured Marines, and has since shut herself in her quarters. About an hour ago we heard Ackerson yelling at her for irresponsibility, and he basically said that your blood was on her hands, that you wouldn't be coming back because of her. Will's watching her now."

No one needed to say anything more, and the three of them hurried to Laura's quarters. Will was waiting for them in front of Laura's living room window, a dark look on his face.

"She's been staring off into space for the past few minutes," he said, motioning to the window; through it they could see Laura sitting and staring at the wall. As they watched, she went into her bedroom and closed the door. A few minutes later, they saw her climb out of the bedroom window and sprint toward the fence. John just had time to notice she had a pair of combat knives strapped to her waist before she vanished into the shadows.

The four Spartans went after her, and saw a hidden gate in the fence surrounding the base; the chain-link fence had been cleverly cut and hinged to make a door, one that no one could find unless they knew it was there. _That's how she was always able to slip in and out undetected,_ John realized. Laura had left it open as she ran off.

"Will, can you tell where she's going?" Linda asked, green eyes holding an unusually worried look.

"Into those woods, but beyond that I couldn't tell you. She could be going anywhere."

"I know where she's going," John whispered, taking the lead. _It makes sense, that's the only place she'd be going in these woods, but

why?_ Remembering the knives, he felt a cold chill at the base of his neck.

"Where?" Fred asked, sprinting just behind him.

"Silver Pond, and I don't think she's going there to sit and think." The meaning of his words worried him once again, and John hoped for once that he was wrong.

The four friends ran through the woods, following her trail and fearing the worst.

Laura hadn't come to her decision lightly; it had taken her a lot of thought, but the answer was clear—"there was only one way she could bring John home. Ackerson's lecture hadn't been nearly what she'd anticipated, but his words rang clearly in her mind, as did their meaning: _John will only be allowed to come home when I'm dead._ She felt that there was only one way to save the man she loved, and she was determined to take that way. Having slipped out of her quarters, she decided to leave the fence gate open for once: it didn't matter now whether anyone knew about it or not. She knew the perfect place for what she intended, and sprinted quietly into the woods.

A while later, Laura stood on the banks of Silver Pond, and allowed the memories to flood over her. It had been here that she and Nicole had spent so many hours together, here that her father had taught her to swim. It had been here that she'd allowed herself to be captured by the Covenant to save Nicole and dear little Skeeter, and it had been here—|Laura pressed her fingers to her lips, recalling the night when she'd finally learned the truth: John loved her. Now there was one last thing that she needed to do here, the one thing that would save the man she loved. It was only fitting, since so much that had been good in her life had happened here. As she knelt down beside the pond, a breeze suddenly kicked up: it felt like fingers lightly touching her cheeks. She swore she could hear her grandmother's creaking, kindly voice: _Angel, no._

"Nana, I have no choice. They'll keep him in danger unless I do this. I won't let them kill him, I can't."

Angel, no. Don't do this.

"It's the only way I can save him," she whispered, a tear sliding silently down her face. She hated herself for what she was about to do, hated the reason she had to do it, hated life for bringing her to this point. _I should never have let this happen, I should have known it would end this way. Fate is cruel_. Softly, not really hoping anyone would hear, she began to chant a verse from one of her poems, though the words weren't quite the same:

Shrieking Eagles, here I lie,

Cold and dead beneath the sky.

I loved when I should not have dared,

My final fate has been declared.

She pulled out one of her knives and pointed it at her heart. "For John," she whispered as she stabbed herself, sinking the knife in to

the hilt.

The Spartans ran into the glade just in time to hear her speak her own epitaph. John ran forward, but he was too late; Laura plunged the knife deep into her chest, collapsing in a pool of her own blood.

As she hovered in the haze of death, she saw her love bending over her. "Laura, why?"

"To save your life. I had no choice." Her bloody fingers caressed the side of his face, leaving a faint smear of her blood. Ackerson had lied to her, but that didn't matter now: John would be safe, and that was enough. She smiled sadly and whispered one last word of comfort.

"I'll be waiting for you, John, on the other side. I'll wait forever if I must, but promise me you won't hurry the end. Promise me you'll save Earth."

"I promise, _alaya_," he whispered, a few tears trickling down his face, mingling with her blood. She smiled and closed her eyes, and all was silent.

The other three Spartans stood at the edge of the glade listening to the exchange, knowing now what Ackerson had intended with his words, and realizing how cruel he'd been all along. None of them dared to say anything, just watching as John cradled the sad, silent body of what had once been Laura Morisson, the deadly BLADE, the secret Spartan. They were still standing there when General West, Colonel Ackerson, and several other senior officers and members of the military arrived. Lorient had alerted West as soon as she realized what Laura was planning, but she had been too late.

"What happened?" Ackerson asked, his glee noticeable even to the rest of the brass. Hearing his voice, John gently lowered the body of the woman he had loved, got up, and punched him in the face. He wanted to drill the bastard as hard as he could, but some inner voice cautioned him not to; as it was, half-strength nearly broke his neck.

"She killed herself to save me, because of you. You knew she'd do anything to save me, and you used her love to kill her. Her blood is on your hands." He scooped her body in his arms and walked away, uncaring about anything else, not realizing that at that very moment Ackerson was being arrested for treason. As he walked away, Laura's words echoed in his mind.

"_I'll be waiting for you, John, on the other side. I'll wait forever if I must, but promise me you won't hurry the end. Promise me you'll save Earth._" She had left the most important thing unsaid, but he knew it anyway. _Laura, I love you. I always will._

A/N: Yes, slightly cheesy I know. But here's where things get tricky: what should I do next? Should Laura live or die? Your input is much appreciated!

37. Chapter 36: Stroke of Luck

Hey all! Well, the votes are in, the opinions counted, and the results...well, you'll just have to see for yourself.

Disclaimer, I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Thirty-Six: Stroke of Luck

As he walked away, Laura's words echoed in his mind.

_ "I'll be waiting for you, John, on the other side. I'll wait forever if I must, but promise me you won't hurry the end. Promise me you'll save Earth." She had left the most important thing unsaid, but he knew it anyway. Laura, I love you. I always will._

As he clasped her body closer to him, John almost swore he could still feel a heartbeat, albeit a faint one. Stopping for a moment and placing two fingers on her neck, he confirmed it: Laura was still alive, but just barely. With no clear idea of what to do, he began to run as quickly and as smoothly as he could, somehow heading closer to the base hospital. Pausing in his speed to negotiate a rough patch of ground, John resumed his run, taking extreme care not to hurt her anymore than was necessary.

****Adams Medical Facility, 2253 hours****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Dr. Gedeon was just finishing up a difficult lab test when a nurse stuck her head into the office.

"Yes, what is it?" She didn't mean to be abrupt, but this particular portion of the test was tricky, and if done improperly could negate the entire thing.

"Doctor, I think you'd better let me finish that up. You're wanted in ER stat." The nurse lowered her head. "I think it's your daughter."

Dr. Gedeon dropped everything and raced as quickly as she could to the emergency room, stopping as she saw Laura laid out on an operating table. Doctors, nurses, and orderlies were just finishing the transfer of her vital functions to life-support machines, and in one corner of the room stood a Spartan. She glanced up and noticed the look on his face, and thought it reminded her of Laura over the past few months: pain, despair, fear, loneliness.

"What have we got?" she quizzed one of the doctors, pulling off the lab coat and moving nearer to her daughter; even though she wanted to scream in her fear and worry, her medical persona took hold until she could move past the crisis point.

"Knife wound. It just missed her heart, but it was a near thing: took out two-thirds of her lung, severed a couple of connecting arteries. She's got severe internal bleeding, and according to the man who brought her in," the doctor indicated the Spartan, "she's been unconscious for about an hour. We've got her on life support for now, until we can get some new organs cloned for her and move her into the OR."

"How did this happen? How exactly did she get stabbed?"

"No idea. You'd have to ask him."

The room emptied out as the doctors went to see about Laura's replacement organs, leaving Dr. Gedeon alone with the formidable-looking Spartan. Now that she looked at him closely, she recognized him almost immediately: Master Chief Petty Officer SPARTAN-117, the man who had gone alone to rescue Laura from the Covenant.

"Master Chief, what happened? Who stabbed my daughter?"

"Ma'am." John hesitated. _How do I tell her?_ "She did it herself. I couldn't get there in time to stop her."

"But why?" She looked intensely at the Master Chief, her blue eyes sporting a worried and confused look. As she stared at him, she noticed a pair of dogtags around his neck, dogtags that looked very out-of-place and oddly familiar. _Wait a minuteâ€|those were Laura's! How did he get them?_

"Ma'am, it'sâ€|a long story. Before I tell you, though, I need to know: Can you save her?" Dr. Gedeon noticed the look in his dark eyes, a look that mirrored something she'd once seen in Laura's eyes several months ago--hope.

"There's a good chance that she won't make it yet, but I won't give her up as easily as I did thirty-seven years ago. I'll do everything I can to save her; she is my daughter after all."

"Thank you, ma'am." He shifted uneasily, still not knowing where to begin.

"Several months back I was sent off to the front lines, by Colonel Ackerson. It wasn't just because of my being a Spartan, since I was the only one he sent. He sent me becauseâ€|because I cared for your daughter, cared enough to risk everything for her." John shook his head, remembering the grief he'd felt leaving Earth, a grief that was only comparable to when Reach fell and most of his team was killed.

"I asked my team to keep an eye on Laura, and they told me when I got back that Ackerson had spoken to her, and basically told her that I wouldn't come home while she was alive. When she heard thatâ€|sheâ€|" he couldn't finish.

Dr. Gedeon was appalled, but she understood. _Why didn't I realize it before? This isn't the first time this has happened, I should've known._ She gently pushed the Spartan into a nearby chair; looking up at her at that exact moment, John saw the strongest resemblance to Laura in the intense look in Dr. Gedeon's blue eyes that he'd seen yetâ€|that exact same fire that had caught his attention in Laura's dark eyes was there in the doctor's pale ones.

"I understand. She wanted to save you, so she played right into Ackerson's hands. Sometimes I wish she didn't care so much, since it can kill her so easily." Looking at the Spartan sitting in the uncomfortable-looking chair, Dr. Gedeon softened her bitter tone.

"Is that why you went after her, when she was captured?" He nodded. "I should have guessed. Laura told me Ackerson was very upset over that whole thing. I just wish she'd told me everything."

"She was afraid of what ONI might do. I never realized how much she feared them untilâ€¦until I knew how much I loved her." The older woman smiled sadly, and placed one hand on his massive shoulder in reassurance.

"Don't worry, Master Chief. Laura's in good hands here. The number of times she's helped us out when things were busy here garnered her a lot of respect, and just about everyone here will do what they can for her now." She noticed the fatigue in his eyes; he was tired and worn outâ€”and sad. "You should get some rest. I'll tell you if she wakes up. You can't help her anymore, for the moment."

"I don't want to leave her, ma'am."

"She'll be safe, I promise. There's a small bunk area nearby, if you're insistent on staying here. I'll tell General West what's going on." John nodded and allowed Dr. Gedeon to escort him to the overnight room. It was sparsely furnished and not very comfortable, but it was sufficient for his needs. Dr. Gedeon pointed to the bed, and he sank down on top of it.

"I'll see you're not disturbed. The moment she wakes up, I'll call you."

After she left the Master Chief in the overnight room, Dr. Gedeon sat down and held her head in her hands. _Laura, what have you done? I don't know how I can help you anymore._ While she was a decent enough doctor, Dr. Gedeon knew she didn't have the proper knowledge on the changes that ONI had made to Laura's physiology: in short, she didn't know if she could save her own daughter's life. When Laura had been brought in from the Covenant ship after being tortured, all she had done was keep her on pain medication and let her heal herself. Now she wasn't sure what to do.

"How is she?" Dr. Gedeon looked up to see General West and several ONI members standing in the doorway. She hadn't even heard them come in.

"Laura's in critical condition, sir. And without the proper knowledge of her physiology, I can't help her. With all the augmentations that were done, I don't even know where to begin."

"What exactly does she need?" one of the ONI men asked.

"Laura just missed stabbing herself in the heart; as it is, she damaged two-thirds of her left lung and severed two major arteries leading to her heart. She's on life support at the moment."

"I'll see to it that we send you all medical data relevant to the treatment she'll need. But remember, this data is classified."

"Of course."

Laura was floating in a strange dream; she remembered vaguely what had happened after she'd stabbed herself, but part of her still heard

voices from the world she'd left behind—her mother, John, various doctors and nurses. _They're trying to bring me back, trying to save my life,_ she realized. _Poor fools, they don't realize it's already too late._ She saw a light in the distance, strangely clear in the mists which drifted around her; she approached it and found herself in her grandmother's house, in the kitchen. Plants, mostly African violets, were on every windowsill, and there was a smell of freshly baked poppyseed cake all around her. _Nana's favorite._ She bent down to look at the cake cooling on the kitchen table when her grandmother walked into the kitchen. She looked nothing like she had when Laura had disconnected the life support, not frail and old—instead, she looked how Laura remembered her from when she was little: plump, smiling, old yet fit, with her hair tightly curled.

"Angel, how are you? I wasn't expecting you for several more years," the old woman smiled as Laura bent down and wrapped her arms around her, being careful not to squeeze too hard. _Guess old habits really do die hard, even after death_, she thought wryly. _I'm still afraid of injuring people with a hug, even though I can't hurt a ghost._

"Oh, Nana, I missed you. I have so much to tell you."

"Yes, you do, but not yet." Laura looked at her grandmother in surprise. "You need to go back, Laura. It's not time for you to be here yet; no one comes here before their time."

"Nana," Laura's voice began to break, "I can't go back. I've fallen in love, but they'll kill him if I survive. I can't let him die."

"Laura, everything will be fine, trust me. You must go back," the old woman murmured as she kissed Laura on the cheek. Laura saw the kitchen door open, and there was a tunnel leading back to an operating room, and beyond it she saw John. Looking back one last time at her dear grandmother, Laura heard her whisper "Have faith" just before she stepped into the tunnel. For a brief moment she saw faces, and then all was darkness as she slipped again into unconsciousness.

****June 30, 2553 1230 hours****

****Adams Medical Facility****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

It hurts, everything hurts, she thought as she tried to open her eyes. She was lying in a hospital bed, and felt I.V. tubes snaking into her arms. Around her she heard concerned voices, and struggled to recognize them.

"Is she going to be alright, Dr. Gedeon?" _General West? Why's he here?_

"It seems her body has accepted the replacement organs, now all we need to do is wait for her to wake up." _Mom._

"Where's the Chief? I'd have thought he'd be here." _Linda? How on

Earth did she get here?_

"I had to order him off to get some rest an hour ago. He's never left her side for a moment if he could avoid it." _John, here? How? Ackerson will kill him! I have to stop him._ That panicked thought brought her fully awake as she forced her eyes open and struggled to sit up, getting her mother's attention in the process.

"Laura, stay still. You're going to hurt yourself even worse."

"Mom, no, listen to me! They're going to kill him!" Her mother's face frowned in thought for a moment before she remembered the Master Chief's words two days before. "I have to stop them beforeâ€" "

"Laura, it's okay. Nobody's going to kill him. You're safe now. Both of you." General West and Linda stared for a moment before they understood what Dr. Gedeon had picked up on almost immediately: Laura was thinking about the threat from Colonel Ackerson.

"What?" Laura couldn't believe her ears.

"Colonel Ackerson has been arrested for treason, attempted murder, and conduct unbecoming an officer," West spoke up from the corner of the room, a dark look on his face. "Whether or not the conviction will stick remains another matter, but there's no need to worry about him at present." Laura was relieved by this bit of news, but was still very confused.

"How am I still alive? I stabbed myself in the heart." Laura's mom shook her head.

"No Laura, you missed the heart and hit the lung, for the most part. I think that's the only time I've been proud to hear that you missed a target." _And about the only time I've been glad you don't know much about human anatomy, _she thought privately. Before anyone could say anything more, the door opened to see Nicole, Nathan, Fred, and Will standing outside.

"Laura! You're alive!" Nicole shouted as she bolted into the room and threw her arms around her friend's neck. Laura winced but smiled through the pain.

"I may not be if you keep this up much longer," she joked. Nicole immediately let go of her friend.

"Laura, I'll have you know you had everybody worried when you stabbed yourself," Nathan lectured from the doorway, a small smile on his face. "There's about a hundred people in the waiting room just waiting to hear if you're going to make it: myself, Nicole, your father, your brothers, Angela and the twins, several members of the brass, and tons of Marine and Naval personnel, not to mention a few Covenant pupils of yours." He smiled a little more broadly. "Nicole probably would have brought Skeeter with her if she'd been allowed."

"Oh shut up, Nathe. No way I could be that popular, remember? Everyone thinks I'm a traitor, and that I sold out humanity to the Covenant, or have you forgotten that little fact? There's no way they would change their minds now." Her dark eyes filled with tears,

remembering the cruelties she'd gone through, and how simple it had really been to push her to destruction. She turned away, trying not to let her pain show, but Nicole and her mother both saw it.

"I think she's had enough visitors for one day. She needs a lot of bed rest if she's going to make it out of this," Dr. Gedeon herded everyone out of the room, deliberately refusing to see the figure who slipped past her into the door.

Laura was trying to cry into the pillow, so no one could see her tears, when she felt a familiar touch on her face, a gentle caress accompanied by a light clinking of dogtags. She turned her head, the tears still flowing, and cried even harder when she looked into John's beautiful brown eyes.

"It's all right, _alaya_," he whispered as he brushed away her tears. "Ackerson's in prison now. He can't hurt you any more, and he can't hurt me."

"Oh, John, I'm so sorry. I only wanted to save you, but he said you would never come home until I was dead. I couldn't let them kill you like that." She cried even harder, and John lifted her up and held her gently, stroking her dark hair as she cried against him.

"I know, Laura, I know. If it makes you feel any better, I hit the bastard myself. Broke his jaw, and damn near broke his neck." When Laura looked at him in surprise, he nodded grimly. "He was practically jumping with glee when he saw you lying there almost dead. I couldn't stand him looking so smug." He stopped for a moment and cupped her chin in his hands.

"When I realized you were still alive, I brought you here. Dr. Gedeon saved you, she gave you back to me. I refused to leave until I knew you'd be all right." He brought his head down and kissed her gently, softly. Laura had dreamed of his touch every day since he'd left, and it filled her to the soul. She kissed him back, wishing she had the strength to hold him in her arms. As it was, she was stuck in a hospital bed, with John holding her as if she were only a child.

A noise from the doorway interrupted their reunion, and they both looked up to see an amused Dr. Gedeon watching them.

"Master Chief, I'm sure you're pleased to see Laura's current condition, but I must insist you give her time to rest. She has a long road ahead of her, recovery-wise." He nodded and looked at Laura again.

"If you ever try something like that againâ€"

"I'll make sure not to leave a visible trail," she interrupted with an evil smirk on her face. Seeing his shocked reaction at her quip, Laura rolled her eyes. "You still can't tell when I'm being a smartass?"

"I've given up trying. Now get some rest, so I can get you out of here sooner." A small smile flickered across his face briefly, but faded as he turned and exited the room.

October 15, 2553

****Adams Medical Facility****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

Laura hadn't been feeling well, and had asked her mother to run some tests. This was the third morning in a row she'd woken up sick, and it worried her. _I can't stay out of this hospital for more than a few months, can I?_ she thought as she waited for her results. When her mother entered the room, Laura could tell from the smirk on her face that she was in for it.

"Well, what's wrong with me? What kind of virus is it, and how do I deal with it?" _And why the evil smirk?_

"Actually, it's not a virus, and there's nothing wrong with you. You're in perfect health," Dr. Gedeon replied, her grin getting wider. She enjoyed playing mind games with her daughter, even though it was rare that she had the upper hand.

"If I'm so healthy, then why do I wake up sicker than a dog?" Laura snapped in annoyance. "There's no reason why I wake up and feel likeâ€|waitâ€|you're kiddingâ€|" her voice trailed off as she finally realized what her mother was implying. "Am Iâ€|?"

"Congratulations." The grin on Dr. Gedeon's face got even wider.

"How long?" _Is this even possible?_

"About four months. As I recall, that was just about the time you finally got out of here after your attempted suicide. You practically vanished that night, and no one could find you." Laura could only gape at her mother's face: if her grin got any wider her whole head would split in half. "At least, we thought no one could find you."

Laura didn't hear anything else; her thoughts were busy turning inward. _All this time, I never dared hope. Now I have almost everything I wanted, and when John returns I will have everything._

38. Chapter 37: Surprise!

Salutations to my readers! Sorry to say there's not too much left to go, but hopefully it'll be as good. Anyway, somebody's got a bit of a surprise coming to him--enjoy!

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Chapter Thirty-Seven: Surprise!

The Covenant were closing in, and the rest of the staff were panicking, trying to escape. She looked at the elderly woman in front of her as she put on her combat armor.

_"Mom, you have to lead them to safety. You know where they can hide."

Get as many people there as you can."_

"What about you?" she shouted._

"I'll try to hold them off, buy you time to get everyone out of here." Green armored gauntlets snapped into place, followed by an assault rifle, submachine guns, grenades, and a pair of sheathed combat knives._

"You can't do this! You'll never survive!"_

"If I don't do this, no one will survive. There's no choice." She paused a moment, a look of regret in her eyes._

"Take the children. Get them out of here, get them to the shelter. If we survive this, he'll come looking for us."_

"What about you? What if you don't survive?"_

An armored helmet slipped into place as the Spartan finished her preparations and picked up her assault rifle._

"I've never failed before, Mom, and I won't now."_

"Here they come," she muttered as she watched the alien horde advance: Jackals with their flimsy-looking energy shields, Brutes on all fours bellowing for blood. They were attacking Camp Hayes _en masse_, and seemed intent on a bloody victory. Why they'd come to this area she wouldn't know, maybe they were just trying to cause as much havoc as possible by keeping the Marines spread thin. In any case, it didn't matter: she was the last line of defense here, and she refused to let them through while she could still fight.

One of the Brutes in the horde caught sight of her, and let out a blood-curdling roar. He charged her, still bellowing, and from the sounds of things he wanted blood: her blood. She smiled grimly behind her reflective faceplate: no doubt they'd mistook her for a 'demon' because of the armor. _At least the armor'll give me the edge I need,_ she thought, tightening her grip on the assault rifle. _Now if I can only get the ugly bastards to come a little closerâ€¦_|_ Everything seemed to slow down as she waited anxiously for the horde to advance; in reality it only took a few minutes. _Just a little moreâ€¦_|_ Her thumb hit the detonator she was holding and she grinned inside her helmet as she watched the body parts fly. _Perfect!_

"Come and get me, you ugly sons-of-bitches!" she shouted at the alien horde as she opened fire, the speakers in her suit broadcasting the message and generally pissing off her opponents. Plasma fire began filling the air, but she stood her ground for a little longer, assault rifle blazing into the raging Brute advance. Sprinting to the side to dodge a round from a Brute-shot, she threw out a handful of her bladed disks, and started firing again as they flew forward. She knew she wouldn't be able to stop them all, but she had to try. _Just a little more time, I need to give them more time! _Momentarily pausing to reload, she noticed the absence of Elites, Grunts, and Hunters from the battlefield. _Okay, that's _really_ strange. Those guys never miss out on a battle, so what gives?_ There wasn't time to think of the answers, though, since the Brutes were closing in, weapons blazing. Above her was a bunch of flying things, too small to

be fighters and much too large to be projectiles: vaguely insect-like, lightly armed with plasma pistols, needlers and very little armor. _Great, now I've got those things on my ass,_ she cursed inwardly as she grabbed more bladed disks, dodging plasma fire from above; she hadn't had a lot of experience fighting Drones, but what she knew from hacking ONI's files would hopefully be enough.

"Target Drones," she ordered, glancing upward in time to see the diminutive weapons strike home; until there were no more Drones in the immediate vicinity the disks would keep going. _One less thing to worry about._ An ominous click indicated her rifle was empty, the Brutes were almost on her, and there wasn't enough time to reload; tossing the weapon aside and switching to submachine guns, she dodged and weaved, hoping to take out as many as she could. Pausing momentarily in her dodge-fire-reload routine to whip out a fragmentation grenade, she lobbed it in the general direction of several Jackals, who were using their shields to form a defense for some of the smarter Brutes; she didn't hear the explosion, but noticed the collapse of a wall of shields and fired several rounds into the unprotected aliens. Several plasma shots finally made contact with her armor, breaching her shields and knocking her to her knees; she felt the pain from the burns and cried out as she got to her feet. A couple of loud explosions alerted her to a pair of Wraiths nearby, and she barely moved in time to escape the ball of glowing blue lightâ€|

****March 2, 2554****

****UNSC Reserve Base Camp Hayes****

****North America****

The war was over, humanity was going to survive. The Covenant were gone, and now Humanity had a chance to rebuild. These facts were in every mind left alive, but they were not at the forefront of the Master Chief's mind as he picked his way through the rubble, looking for something he feared to see. _Where is she? Did she survive?_ He reached a series of ruins that had once been a military base, and picked his way to what had been a bunkhouse near the southern edge. He had always assumed it was a standard bunk, but looking closer he noticed a depression in the earth beneath the house's foundations. _A cellar, or a bomb shelter,_ he realized. _Could anyone be down there? Could they still be alive?_ Feeling that he was being watched, he activated his suit's external speakers and spoke to what appeared to be empty air.

"Laura, are you there?"

A familiar disembodied voice, one that he recognized as belonging to Laura's personal AI, replied, "No, Chief, she's not." After a brief moment's hesitation, the voice added, "You'd better come down here."

A concealed door opened to reveal a set of stairs leading down to darkness. John descended and found himself in a highly sophisticated area, which at first glance appeared to be a cross between an armory and a command center: there were weapon racks, black suits, body armor and powered exoskeletons, and reinforced walls, with rooms branching off in various directions. Computer terminals were everywhere, and

there were even a few cryotubes along one section of wall. He noticed several people gathered around the room in various places: officers, doctors, civilians, Marines, Helljumpers, practically everyone on or near the base, including the Covenant POWs Laura had befriended and educated. In another room he swore he heard children crying. While John was still wondering at this, he saw General West heading towards him, a worried look on his face.

"Master Chief, it's good to see you. I've been listening to the chatter over the E-band, and its good news to everyone down here." He paused a moment and shook his head; the Chief noticed a half-healed gash behind one ear. "We've all been through hell down here."

"Sir, if I may ask, where's Blade?" He didn't dare refer to her by name in front of the Marines.

"This way, son." West led him to one of the cryotubes, where Dr. Gedeon and the Covenant warriors were clustered nearby. The little Grunt named Yipin was attempting to climb atop the cryotube, scrabbling frantically to try and view the occupant. They parted, and John saw a figure in green battle armor lying inside. The armor was charred, cracked, and broken; he could see blackened skin in places. The helmet covered the face, but there was a slight tilt to the head as though the soldier had died in defiance. He didn't need to see her face to know this was Laura: the tilted head and the combat knives strapped to the armor's waist gave her away. A frown crossed his face inside his armor, as he remembered how much Laura had hated the Mjolnir suit.

"She put on the armor to give herself a better chance of success," her mother whispered. "I wanted her to rest, but they were all around us. She bought us time to get here, and then the prisoners came and stopped the Covenant from killing her completely. If she hadn't been so weak she might've pulled through."

"What happened, Dr. Gedeon? Why was she weak?" John was puzzled; Laura had always kept herself in the best of shape.

"You mean she didn't tell you? No, that's right, she couldn't tell you." Dr. Gedeon wiped away a tear as the children John had heard earlier cried again. "You'd better see for yourself."

She led the Chief into the other room, where Laura's best friend and sister-in-law were each rocking an infant in their arms, something he'd never seen before. Each child wasn't much more than a week old, and so small they both might have fit easily in one of his armor gauntlets. Looking closer, John swore he saw Laura's face in one child's large eyes. The other one was a bit larger, but he saw the same resemblance to the other infant. He turned his head to look at Dr. Gedeon, and found himself asking the impossible.

"She was pregnant?"

"Yes. Twins, one boy and one girl. It was a difficult delivery, twins usually are, and two days after they were born the Covenant attacked the base. She told me to get them to safety, and went out to buy us time." Picking up the little girl, she rocked her in her arms. The child reached out one closed fist and touched the elderly doctor's cheek, bringing a smile to her grandmother's face. John wished he could hold the child, apparently his daughter, but wished even more

that he could hold her mother.

"Can you save Laura?" he whispered.

"Chief, I don't know. I don't have the files or the expertise to perform such extensive repairs. ONI certainly isn't going to provide the data, even though she's saved their lives thousands of times. At this point, she'd be better off dead, but no one here wants that anymore. I can't save her, not without the knowledge ONI has, but as long as she stays in cryo she'll still have a chance."

A familiar voice came out of a speaker, as Lorienna materialized at Dr. Gedeon's elbow.

"I can obtain the data, Dr. Gedeon; in fact I possess it already. Laura slipped into my programming when she created me, just in case it was ever needed."

"Why didn't you say anything before?" the doctor demanded, a sharp edge in her voice; it reminded John of all the times Laura had been angry.

"You didn't ask" the AI replied coolly. "Be that as it may, I have the knowledge you need. However, given the extent of the damage and the lack of appropriate facilities, we may not be able to give her more than a forty-five percent chance of survival."

"Then I'll do what I can with what we have," Dr. Gedeon stated bluntly, her voice hardening with her resolve; John now realized where Laura had gotten many of her personality traits. "There's a field medical kit here, and you have the files we need, so let's get to work. I won't thaw her until her replacement organs are ready and the surgical field is up. I'm not giving up on her yet."

While the doctor viewed the files, John asked the AI a question that had been plaguing him ever since he'd gotten down there and seen his children.

"How did sheâ€¦I mean, how could I have impregnated her? The augmentations we received were supposed to prevent this."

"Incorrect, Master Chief. The procedure to which you refer indicates a risk of repressed sexual drive, not an actual elimination, and certainly there was no mention of sterility." Lorienna flashed an evil grin. "I would have thought you would have discovered that by now, especially after all those nights in her company. It would still be quite possible for a Spartan to bear a child. And if you're worried about whether or not they're really yours," the AI finished, a touch of sardonic amusement in her voice, "trust me, they are. She refused to even look at anyone else the whole time you were gone, let alone be intimate with them."

Two days later, the Master Chief sat in one corner watching his children sleep. According to Dr. Gedeon, Laura had pulled through the surgeries just fine, or as fine as possible. She wouldn't be ready or able to receive visitors for some days, though, so John contented himself with getting to know his children. No names had been chosen for them yet, but that didn't matter; he wanted Laura to help him choose their names, because they were as much hers as they were his.

Ours, our children, he thought again, strangely happy with the idea. He happened to turn away for a moment, thinking he heard something, when one of his children began to cry; when he turned to see them he saw a slender female figure standing beside one crib, holding his daughter. The figure swayed gently back and forth, whispering soothing sounds to the child until she quieted; the robe she wore made a gentle rustling noise as she swayed. The Chief couldn't see her face in the shadows, in spite of his biochemically-altered eyesight, and waited to see more, half hoping for the impossible. Once the child was asleep again, the figure turned and went to the other crib; there was something familiar about the way she movedâ€|

"Laura?" The figure turned and moved a little closer; her dark hair was tangled and matted, and she seemed to limp, but she was alive. She spoke, and it was her voice, though full of doubt, "John?"

"It's me, Laura." She moved a little closer, and he saw the burns on her body where it peeked through the robe.

"What happened?" he asked gently, or as gently as his harsh voice would allow. Laura smirked wearily, the pain twisting it into a sort of half-grimace.

"Plasma burns, and a close call with a Wraith's plasma bomb. I was damned lucky the Covies were content to just kill me and let me liveâ€"either that, or they were too busy massacring whoever they could. I tried to get them to safetyâ€|"she swayed dangerously, nearly toppling over.

He crossed the room and took her gently in his arms, knowing how much pain she must be in; hell, when he'd captured the _Ascendant Justice_ and used it to save his team he'd received similar injuries. She rested her dark head against his shoulder, taking comfort in his strength.

"It's over, _alaya_, " he whispered. "The war's over."

"Finally. But what will happen now?"

"It doesn't matter. We're together now, and we're the only ones left. Fred, Will, Linda, they're gone; they went out on a mission and never came back. It's just us." She heard the pain in his voice.

"Don't worry, John. I think they'll be all right." She could think of only one way to comfort him; reaching up, she caressed his face, her gentle touch saying everything she couldn't. John scowled suddenly.

"You shouldn't be up yet. Your mother saidâ€"

"And since when have you listened to a doctor's advice?" she returned, the old spark returning to her eyes, reminding John why he loved her in the first place. "Besides, I've been away from you for too long; would you deny me the chance to be alone with my children and their father, who just happens to be the one person I can't live without?" Her voice, though hushed, was rising rapidly, so John silenced her in the best way possible. When they finally broke apart, Laura smiled, ignoring the pain she was feeling.

"I knew you missed me," she grinned as her lover pressed her against him.

"Almost as much as the battlefield," he grinned back, deliberately trying to bait her. No doubt he would have taken her right there, had one of his children not started crying. Laura broke away and picked up his son, rocking him gently until he was asleep again.

"We still need to name them," she whispered softly. "I had names picked out, but I wanted to ask you first."

"What names?"

"Samuel and Kelly?" she asked, hesitating over the names. "He was your best friend, after all, and Kelly was almost my friend. It seemed fittingâ€¦" her voice trailed off.

"Samuel Frederic, and Kelly Linda," John whispered, gently wrapping his arms around the mother of his children. "I just wish I knew what happened to the others."

"John, I promise one day we'll find them, or at least find out what happened to them. For now, though, all we can do is believe that they're safe." Putting Samuel back into his crib, she turned and wrapped her arms around John's neck, whispering into his ear as he held her close.

"Besides, Spartans make their own hope."

****Onyx, unidentified alternate dimension****

Dr. Halsey, Senior Chief Petty Officer Mendez, Fred, Kelly, Linda, and the surviving SPARTAN-IIIs explored their new dimension, carrying the cryotubes containing their fellow teammates with them wherever they went. Every day they made a new camp, and while Dr. Halsey tried to find a way to open the cryopods, the Spartans explored the terrain, looking for anything they could use to get home. True to the doctor's estimates, the world was vast, and while it seemed barren they still felt like they were being constantly watched. As they climbed a hill, they realized they were right when they saw a strange mixture of Covenant and human soldiers, wearing highly-advanced armor and carrying weapons of a type they'd never seen before. The Spartans and Mendez raised their weapons, but Dr. Halsey motioned them down.

"Wait, look closer. These must be Forerunners. Look at the weapons, the armor. It's more advanced than even Covenant technologies."

"Are you willing to bet your life on that, doctor?" Mendez growled.

"Whether I am or not, we'd never stand a chance against those weapons."

"Then what do you suggest, Dr. Halsey?" Kelly asked.

"Communication."

She approached the soldiers, hands out to show she was

unarmed.

Arnyris looked doubtfully at the group gathered on the hill. _How could these be like us? They're primitives!_ He stared at the old woman approaching, hand out. She tried to speak, but though she was a human like him, her words were meaningless in his ears. His Elite comrade, Nosa 'Purimee, looked over at him.

"These are not Reclaimers, as we are."

"No, but they are here, and we must decide what to do with them. We cannot understand their language, and they probably cannot understand us. The Council should decide; we must get them to the city. Perhaps gestures will suffice for now." He pointed at the old woman, then at the group of humans behind her, then pointed a direction. The woman nodded, and motioned the group behind her to come forward.

Dr. Halsey looked at Mendez and her Spartans as they gathered around (by this time she'd 'adopted' the SPARTAN-IIIs) and swallowed the lump in her throat.

"They want us to follow them."

"Is that really a good idea, ma'am?" one of the older S-IIIs asked: Tom, she remembered.

"I honestly cannot think of a better option. With luck, they may lead us to a city, and perhaps to someone who can facilitate some means of communication."

"It could just as easily be a trap," Fred muttered. "We should make a break for it. We're fast enoughâ€"

"But you also have no idea where you are," Mendez pointed out. "We have no choice at the moment but to follow them." Fred nodded reluctantly, and the group began to follow the Forerunner warriors.

Arnyris led the strangers to the city, and stopped them outside a small house. The woman who lived here was a descendant of the woman who had saved them all from the Flood, if the histories were true. Like her ancestor, she was a scientistâ€"annoying as all of them were--and had a knack for technology. He stood outside the door and called her name.

"Arisaya! Arisaya!" There was no response. "Arisaya!"

"That _scientist_ gets more annoying with each passing day," he muttered before bellowing: "ARISAYA!"

"I can hear you, Arnyris, no need to bellow like a vengeful Hunter," a sharp voice replied from behind him; while he'd been shouting her name to the heavens, Arisaya had dropped down from the roof where she'd been repairing an antenna and slipped behind both him and his platoon. Arnyris quickly banished his surpriseâ€"Arisaya had always had a skill for silenceâ€"and coldly explained the situation.

"We have found these on our patrol, but they do not know our language. We must take them before the Council, but it will do no good if they cannot speak."

"So you need me to find a translator? You are fortunate that a _scientist_ like me has nothing to do in her spare time." Arnyris winced at her bitter tone, a precise, mocking echo of his own.

None of them could understand what the two Forerunners were saying, but when the woman turned her head, the Spartans caught their breath: a face they had seen many times before was staring them in the eyes. Other than her eyes being a deep blue, the face was Laura Morisson's back on Earth. It was also the face of the Forerunner scientist Alaya, who had been nearly an expert on the Flood.

"Laura? Or are you Alaya?" Linda asked. The woman looked at her sharply, and they saw that she was not either. She looked them all over, then turned to Dr. Halsey and beckoned. The soldiers tried to stop her, but she glared at them and they backed down. Looking at them again, she pointed at herself and said "Arisaya," then pointed at them with a questioning look in her eyes.

"Doctor Catherine Halsey," Dr. Halsey said clearly, pointing at herself. The woman tipped her head to the side in puzzlement, then turned and headed to the center of the city. Stopping after a few steps, she turned and beckoned. "_Kai, kai,_" she said, motioning with her hand; apparently she wanted them to go with her.

"Well, there's a start," Kelly quipped. "Her name's Arisaya, and _kai_ apparently means 'come.' Wonder what's going to happen next." That became clear soon after, when the group neared a small statue. The figure on it was that of the young woman leading them, but too weathered to be a recent creation. Dr. Halsey ran over and began studying the characters on the statue's base.

"According to my translation software, this is a statue of the ringworlds' creator, a woman called Alaya. Apparently they attribute their survival to her."

Their guide stopped and noticed the data pad in Dr. Halsey's hand. She approached and gently took the pad, studying the characters on it. After a moment, she bent down and traced some glyphs in the dirt.

"My ancestor never wanted this glory," Dr. Halsey read. "She only wanted peace."

Arisaya looked at these strangers with renewed interest. _They cannot speak our language, but the woman can read it with her primitive data pad. There is much we could discuss in time._ She led the into the science lab, where she motioned the two Hunters on guard duty to stand down.

"There is nothing to fear," she told the bonded warriors, Ugada Maru Fosa and Inogo Maru Arus.

"These are armed," Fosa rumbled.

"Armed or not, they have tried no evil. They are here to learn, and you are here to protect, not attack in cold blood. Send for a medical specialist; there are people in those cryopods that must be removed." She rummaged through the shelves of machines and equipment until she found a slender circlet. As she brought it out, Arisaya almost swore

she saw two of the strange armored warriors stiffen.

Fred and Linda recognized the delicate device: Laura had found it on the Covenant cruiser they had captured. It allowed the wearer to access memories both conscious and subconscious. Laura had tested it, and it had given them their first glimpse into the Forerunners, as well as a brief glimpse into her own life. Fred looked at Linda and Kelly.

"I'm going to try it out. I know a bit of what it does, and I'm going to take the chance." Linda nodded. While she began to explain the device to the rest of the group, Fred stepped forwards. The woman called Arisaya pointed at his helmet and motioned for him to take it off. He nodded and removed it.

Arisaya was quick to hide her surprise at the face of the warrior underneath; apparently he'd recently been through a hard battle, for his eyes bore a look of suspicion and weariness, and he was also human, something she'd never expected to see beneath the large armor. His skin was too pale, his eyes too sad, but there was a quiet dignity about him that fascinated her. Holding out the circlet her ancestor had designed, she saw recognition in his face; he made no attempt to remove it when she placed it on his head and adjusted the size, running leads to a console nearby. Immediately pictures flowed out, memories of a war that looked like her worst nightmares: their descendents were fighting each other. _They have forgotten what once was_, she realized sadly. Moving to a control, she began tapping buttons just as a new memory drifted out into the open: a memory of a young woman like these warriors, a woman who was hated because she refused to be controlled. _Much like my ancestor, even in looks_. She saw the lengths her enemies would go to try and destroy her, even threatening the ones she loved. This woman even tried the only thing she could to save them: suicide. It would have succeeded if some part of her hadn't wanted to miss, but her enemies were eventually found and punished. Arisaya continued to monitor the controls, and when the process was complete she moved back to the armored warrior and disconnected the leads.

"I hope it worked. Memory transfers are difficult for me to do; I lack my ancestor's capability."

"Memory transfer?" the strange human asked. Arisaya caught her breath. _It worked!_

Somehow Fred could understand the words that the woman said. _That circlet transfers memories, he remembered finally. Somehow she transferred their language into my head!_ The thought was both intriguing and frightening all at once.

"Yes. Alaya built this device with the intent of swift teaching, and aiding those who no longer remember. I only understand a little of her work, but she was a brilliant scientist and a strong warrior: she is a legend among us now." She approached the others with the circlet, and was pleased when the old woman came forward. Once the transfer was complete, Dr. Halsey was just as surprised as Fred had been.

"This is an incredible piece of technology. I would be honored to examine it."

"You are a scientist as well?" Arisaya was pleased to hear this; there were so few people she could talk to about her ancestor's work, for no one wanted to hear. Continuing with her task, she still listened to the woman's wordsâ€”for her, it was simple to divide her attention between tasks and still complete them with ease.

"Quite. I have so many questions about this place, your people, and of the Covenant."

"Covenant? What is that?" She seemed puzzled as she continued the transfer on yet another of the strange humans.

"A group of races trying to wipe us out," Fred replied.

Arisaya shook her head sadly. "Alaya feared this would happen. But all such matters go before the Council. As you are strangers, they must decide your fate; we have to be careful because of the Flood. This will help you make your case." She finished the transfer on the last of the newcomers and stood. "Come with me, there is nothing to fear." After a moment's pause, she added, "Perhaps it would be wisest if you left your weapons behind; I promise you will have no need of them here, and that no one will harm you." The Spartans hesitated for a moment, then put their weapons down at Dr. Halsey's nod.

"It looks like we're going to be here a while," Kelly commented.

39. Chapter 38: Reunions and Endings

Hey all! Forgive me for taking so long, and forgive me for doing this, but I must: this is the last chapter! Hopefully it meets with reader approval. I'd like to thank all my readers/reviewers for their enthusiasm and patience, couldn't have done it without you!

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Reunions and Endings

****April 3, 2558****

****UNSC Survey Ship Aquilae****

****Four years later****

Laura had had to pull a few strings to allow a survey of this area; and even more strings to get both herself and her husband on the ship. Well, technically we're not married, but we might as well be_, she mused as she studied 'classified' ONI reports from the original mission to the planet Onyx. Apparently a nuclear blast had destroyed the entire world, which had been artificially created in the first place. Laura wasn't sure why she had to see for herself, but something was calling her to that system; it was the same feeling she got on clear spring nights, when she felt the call of the hills. Something's missing, something we've overlooked, but what? Her thoughts were interrupted by soft, heavy footfalls on the deck; there was only one person with that tread.

"Still not comfortable on ships, John?" she asked with a small smile on her face.

"I'd much rather have my feet on the ground," John replied as he slid into an empty chair next to Laura. "How soon until we arrive?"

"Ten minutes I think. They're going to call us when we get in system." She looked away from the reports, and John saw genuine concern in her eyes. "I don't know what we'll find there. If these reports are true, there's nothing to find, but I can't help but feel that there's something we've overlooked."

"We'll see what we find when we get there." He touched her face, raising it to eye level with his own. "If you have a feeling like that, since you have Forerunner memories in your head, there's probably something to them."

She smiled. "Hey, you have Forerunner memories too. And yet, you still think I have some special intelligence." Her dark eyes sparkled with her teasing words, and John recalled the first time he'd seen the laughter in her eyes: the first time he and his team had eaten dinner with her and her mother, and Laura had joked about the rolls.

"My memories are more of a lovesick captain's than of a respected scientist's," he replied, his smile matching hers perfectly.

"Hardly respected, seeing as she was barely known," Laura mused, dropping her eyes to the deck. John cupped her chin in one hand and made her look into his eyes again.

"She had his respect, and his love, that's all that mattered." _Just like you have mine_, he thought, and Laura saw it in his eyes. For the next five minutes, she forgot about the files in front of her, the fact that they were both on a ship heading into unknown territory, and the fact that they were sitting in an area where anyone could walk in on them. Fortunately, no one did, and when they broke apart John grinned.

"That was close."

"Yeah, that was close. What were you thinking?" she teased.

"I was thinking about how best to keep you from worrying." He gently touched the side of her face, brushing back a wayward strand of dark hair, leaning in closer once again.

"_**All hands, standby for Slipspace exit. Repeat, standby for Slipspace exit.**_"

Laura rose at the announcement, pulling her dark hair back into a simple knot, and headed for the bridge, closely followed by her 'husband'. Just as she entered the bridge, she saw the void of Slipspace resolve into stars and suns. Where the planet Onyx used to be was a blank void in the system. A sensor to her right began to blare, and a technician studied the readout, a puzzled look on his face.

"What is it?" The tech, startled by the seemingly sudden appearance of two formidable uniformed lieutenants, jerked around in surprise.

Laura was getting really annoyed by these reactions every time someone saw her in uniform. _Why are they afraid of me? I'm still human, just like any of them, and yet they're still scared._

"Ma'am, there's a subspace anomaly on the sensors. It's nothing the computers have ever seen before."

"Let's see it, son." The tech pulled the image up on a large display, and watched as the lieutenant studied it intently. She seemed to frown, and moved to speak to the captain.

"Sir, I respectfully request that we move closer and investigate this anomaly. This is something we've never encountered before, and it would do well to obtain a full record for analysis." Laura neglected to point out, however, that this particular anomaly was originating exactly from where the planet Onyx used to be.

"As true as that may be, Lieutenant, my first priority is the safety of my ship and crew." _Ah, he's a cautious man, good._

"Of course, Captain. I don't expect you to waste lives for no reason. However, it would still be possible to observe this anomaly and jump to Slipspace if any danger presented itself, would it not?"

"Yes, it would, but why is ONI interested in spatial anomalies?" The captain clearly was a perceptive man, as well as cautious.

"ONI has its reasons, and it's hardly my place to question. Our orders are clear: observe any and all spatial phenomenon in this sector. If you're worried for your crew, I believe I can assure you that there is minimal risk in this sector from spatial anomalies." _How do I know? I can't know that but I do. Waitâ€|oh boy._ She was remembering research from another life, research on alternate dimensions.

"Very well. Navigation, move us closer to the coordinates of the spatial anomaly. Begin data recording as soon as we're in range." Laura felt the ship slide forward smoothly as they headed closer. Something nagged at her, as if she was supposed to remember something about this anomaly, but what it was she couldn't say. Then it came to her all of a sudden. _A portal to an alternate dimension would show up as this type of anomaly_, she remembered as a flash of memory drifted past. She motioned to John and moved to the rear of the bridge.

"John, it's a doorway. Alaya realized this kind of anomaly would occur every time a portal was made to an alternate dimension in space. Something's coming through, and I can only guess as to what."

"More Covenant?"

"No, not exactly, I don't think so. Maybe Forerunners, or it could be something completely different. At this point it could be anything." Their conversation was interrupted by a sudden alert from one of the bridge officers.

"Sir, reading multiple contacts inbound from the spatial anomaly! I count at least four large vessels and several smaller ships."

"All hands to battle stations! Red alert!" the captain shouted.

"Belay that!" Laura found herself snapping. "Those ships would tear us to pieces. Tactically, we have no chance."

"Lieutenant, you will maintain silence or you will be removed from the bridge," the captain said coldly.

"I doubt it. For one thing, ONI is the one responsible for this survey, and I will only answer to them. Most of the time I won't interfere, but this is an exception. Our ships would never withstand a battle against these forces, surely you must see that."

"Then what would you suggest? The last time we tried to communicate with an alien race we were plunged into a war!"

"Do you think I don't know that? I lost my father and my older brother in that war, and nearly lost everything else I cared about!" Laura's hands shook almost imperceptibly as she struggled to regain control, eventually recomposing herself. "Even so, I think communication is our best course of action. Make sure everyone is ready to jump out, though, in case things get ugly."

Not waiting for the captain's reply, Laura moved to a communications console and began tapping commands; if her hunch and the files from ONI were correct, these were Forerunner ships they were facing off against. She finished the typing and sent a burst signal: Hope springs eternal, but what hope have we against so many? She remembered Alaya saying something like that when she was designing the weapons that the HALO stations would later be equipped with. Laura crossed her fingers, hoping someone would understand it.

Onboard Alaya's Hope, Fred, Dr. Halsey, and their Forerunner companion Arisaya read the strange transmission received from the ship. Something about it seemed familiar, but it took a long while for any of them to figure it out.

"Alaya said that once," Arisaya murmured at last. "I remember reading it in our histories. She spoke of the Flood and how the fight was almost hopeless when she said that."

"But if Alaya said it, how could any humans know of it?" Dr. Halsey mused. Fred didn't dare say anything yet, but he had a feeling as to who had sent the cryptic communiqué.

"Do I dare respond to them? Could it be a trick?" Arisaya asked, ignoring Armyris' attempts to get her attention, since she knew what his response would be. Warriors, they see only destruction, she thought in annoyance.

"Let me send a response," Fred spoke finally. "I have a feeling I know exactly who sent it."

"Sir, receiving a communication from the lead ship!" the communications officer cried. A moment later his voice filled with awe. "It's on the E-band."

"Play it," the captain ordered. Laura and John listened with mounting

hope as a familiar six-tone melody played through the speakers. Their eyes met, and the shared look said Spartans. John felt relief rising in his chest, remembering how four years ago they'd disappeared. They're still alive!

"Captain, permission to open a channel to the lead ship."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant." At the response, John moved forward and slipped on a personal headset, closing the private channel.

"Oly Oly Oxen Free. All out in the free, we're all free."

Two hours later, a Pelican docked with Alaya's Hope, and unloaded a Captain and two lieutenants: one sported a golden eagle insignia on his uniform, while the other wore a plain black uniform with a pair of crossed silver knives embroidered on the right side. Fred immediately recognized the two officers, and felt glad his hunch had been correct. He, Linda, and Kelly moved forward, past the captain and to the lieutenant striding just behind him.

"Good to see you again, John," Fred smiled slightly.

"Fred, Linda, Kelly. I never thought I'd see you again. What's going on? Where's Will?" John didn't understand any of what was going on. At that moment a gasp of surprise was heard as the ship's crew finally noticed Laura standing near the Pelican. She was the only one who seemed completely at ease, apart from the other three Spartans. Staring around her with a nonchalant look on her face, she finally moved up.

"I had a feeling there were still Forerunners around, hidden away somewhere. Never thought they'd hide in another dimension though. Whoever did think of that was thinking on their feet. How'd you find them, Fred?" Dark eyes flickered to the SPARTAN-IIIs standing in the background, and back to Fred. "And who're the squirts?"

"Nice to see you too, Blade." Fred grinned as she swung a punch at his head, deliberately missed him and nailed him lightly in the shoulder.

"You're lucky I've mellowed out recently. Now, care to explain what's going on, or do I need to do some snooping?" Her dark eyes glittered, betraying her relief at seeing them again, especially Linda, whom she had almost been close to. She didn't recognize the other one at first, but after a few moments her name came back clearly, accompanied by memories of a trip to Reach. "Kelly?"

"I would have thought you'd forgotten," Kelly said quietly.

"Hardly. You were the only good thing I remember from that trip. What happened to you? Where'd you wind up after Reach?"

Fred was about to answer when Arisaya and Arnyris entered the room, stopped short, and uttered an exclamation of surprise. Here was her very ancestor in the flesh! Or was it? Looking closer, Arisaya perceived that the woman standing in front of her was not Alaya: her face, though still looking young, was more careworn, and there were lines that hinted at a deep sorrow long buried. The woman looked at her and nodded, seeming unsurprised by anything that might be happening here. She looked at Fred and said something in a language

that Arisaya could barely understand, even after four years of learning from Dr. Halsey.

"I see we have a lot of catching up to do, starting with Alaya's descendant. I assume she is such?" Fred nodded, and the woman seemed satisfied. Her dark eyes sparkled, and a faint smile appeared on her face when she saw Arnyris and his squad of warriors. "Oh yes, definitely a lot of catching up to do."

****Epilogue****

The old woman wandered through her house, looking for something, if only she could remember what. Kelly, that was it, she needed to find Kelly. _When did the house get so big? It was never this big before._ She lived alone now, as alone as she had for many years, but it didn't bother her anymore. No one really visited her, everyone she'd known was gone, and she faded into the background. Her life had been like that for years, but this was different: no one hated her anymore, no one wanted her dead.

"Mom, what are you doing wandering around? And without your cane even!" A male voice brought her wandering mind back to the present, and to her son who had snuck up on her from behind. A smile graced her wrinkled features: they'd taught their children well.

"Sam, since when have I needed a cane to get around my own house?" she asked, her voice creaking and kindly, an echo of the lilting melody it used to be.

"Since you fell last June and fractured your hip. Now what were you looking for?" Sam wasn't about to let the matter rest; he'd inherited her stubbornness, as well as his father's strength.

"I was looking for your sister. Where is Kelly?" Then she remembered: Kelly was at the doctor's, because her son had gotten sick. Sam was checking on her now. "I wanted to see your father."

"Mom, you know what the doctor said: no more graveyard visits. You're too old for those." Sam gently steered her back to her room, thinking this was the end of the matter.

As soon as he'd closed the door, the woman pulled on an old, faded uniform: two faded silver knives winked at her in the dim light. _My son doesn't know his old mother well enough, obviously._ She glanced around the room, looking for a certain spot and frowning at the dingy colors. _I'll have to ask Sam and Kelly to look at the lights in here, I can't remember it ever being this dark._ A gentle push on part of the wall revealed a small passageway, one that hadn't been used in years. She moved quickly through, her eyes needing no light to see where she was going. Navigating the twists and turns, she was soon outside and on her way to the cemetery.

There it was, just where she remembered it: the marble headstone marking his grave. She traced the words in the marble, remembering the day she'd carved them in the stone:

John Spartan (2511-2612)

Master Chief Petty Officer, UNSC Navy

_Lover, Father, Husband all, _

Noble fighter to the last.

_You saved our lives, and asked no thanks, _

Yet we remember all now past.

The old woman smiled at the memories, from when she had first met him on Reach all those years ago, when he'd come to Earth and they'd been forced to work together, everything. She chuckled at the memory of his face when Fred, Linda, and Kelly had returned seemingly from the dead, and the weeks that had followed. _Those SPARTAN-IIIs were a handful and a half those first few weeks_, she mused, recalling how she'd had to thrash the three of them hollow a few times.

"John, do you remember those days? Remember how we had to completely reeducate the Covenant, and how we had to get to know the Forerunners? Remember all the difficulty we had with those rug rats Fred brought back? I never thought I'd miss those days, but now I do." She sighed, a low whisper of air in the cold wind. "Maybe it's because I'm alone. I miss you, John, more than anything, even my parents and my brothers. Although," she chuckled, a dry creaking sound, "you probably wouldn't recognize me by now. I can't move, I'm going blind and deaf, and my face looks more like a raisin than a human face. I got old, and it shows. Guess at a hundred and one even my youthful looks can't last." She laid her old head on the marble headstone, lank white hair billowing in the breeze, but she didn't feel the cold.

"You never got old in my eyes, _alaya_, " a familiar voice murmured, an iron-like sound she hadn't heard for over a year. Raising her head, she saw him clearly: John, as she'd seen him when he'd arrived on earth all those years ago.

"John?" she asked, noticing her own voice sounded different; she sounded several decades younger, the voice she'd used to sing her children and her brother's children to sleep. "Is it possible?"

"You should've known better than to ignore a doctor's advice." The look on his face betrayed him: he was glad to see her again, in spite of her looking so decrepit.

"It would've happened sooner or later, John," she retorted, feeling herself smiling as she hadn't in a while. "It's time, isn't it?"

He nodded, then his face broke into a grin. "Care for a run?" he asked as he held out his hand. She took it, and noticed her own hand was smooth and firm. Tugging on a strand of her hair, she saw it was dark and wavy, like it had been so long ago. Looking at him again, she returned his grin.

"Think you can keep up?" Hand in hand, they ran together, seeing everything from their past lives, and the people they knew. Nothing could stand in their way: they were free.

Two days later, a crowd gathered in the graveyard, honoring another hero laid to rest. Side by side on the tombstone were two names: _John Spartan (2511-2612)_ and _Laura Morisson Spartan (2511-2613)_. And carved beneath her name the words:

Special Operations Officer, UNSC Navy

A secret hidden in plain sight

Faced human cruelty each day.

Yet still she served, her deeds unknown,

With strength no being could take away.

"I don't understand. Why did she slip out? She knew she'd never last," the man murmured, still feeling guilty for letting his guard down.

"Sam, whenever Mom wanted something, nothing would stand in her way," his twin sister replied. "Remember all the times she and Dad would argue? Sometimes even he couldn't stop her, and he was one of the few people who could." Kelly smiled, tears gathering in her eyes as she remembered those happier days. "No one could keep her down. I'm just glad she has some peace."

"Me too," he agreed quietly. "She deserved it."

End
file.